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**REPORT**

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**THE ROYAL LAOTIAN AIR FORCE 1954-1970 (U)**

15 SEPTEMBER 1970

**HQ PACAF**

**Directorate, Tactical Evaluation  
CHECO Division**

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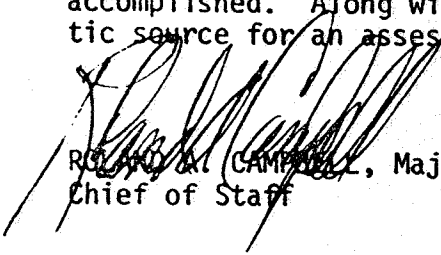
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## PROJECT CHECO REPORTS

The counterinsurgency and unconventional warfare environment of Southeast Asia has resulted in the employment of USAF airpower to meet a multitude of requirements. The varied applications of airpower have involved the full spectrum of USAF-aerospace vehicles, support equipment, and manpower. As a result, there has been an accumulation of operational data and experiences that, as a priority, must be collected, documented, and analyzed as to current and future impact upon USAF policies, concepts, and doctrine.

Fortunately, the value of collecting and documenting our SEA experiences was recognized at an early date. In 1962, Hq USAF directed CINCPACAF to establish an activity that would be primarily responsive to Air Staff requirements and direction, and would provide timely and analytical studies of USAF combat operations in SEA.

Project CHECO, an acronym for Contemporary Historical Examination of Current Operations, was established to meet this Air Staff requirement. Managed by Hq PACAF, with elements at Hq 7AF and 7AF/13AF, Project CHECO provides a scholarly, "on-going" historical examination, documentation, and reporting on USAF policies, concepts, and doctrine in PACOM. This CHECO report is part of the overall documentation and examination which is being accomplished. Along with the other CHECO publications, this is an authentic source for an assessment of the effectiveness of USAF airpower in PACOM.

  
RONALD M. CAMPBELL, Major General, USAF  
Chief of Staff

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*Maurice L. Griffith*  
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Directorate, Tactical Evaluation  
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Proj CHECO Rprt (S/NF), 15 Sep 70

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PREFACE

This CHECO report documents a unique experience in the history of United States assistance to friendly nations -- the covert attempt to establish an effective air force for an underdeveloped country in danger of being taken over by the communists. In creating and supporting the Royal Lao Air Force, US advisors have faced a host of problems, not the least of which has been that of command and control, as separate US agencies, each reporting through different channels, have helped build during the past nine years an air arm which has increased from a handful of transport and liaison aircraft to a strike force which is now capable of flying nearly 3000 sorties a month. Detailed in this report are the methods which the American Embassy, the CIA, the Air Attache, the Thailand based T-28, C-47, and H-34 Instructor cadres, and the Deputy Chief, JUSMAGTHAI have used during this period.

This report is not meant to be a success story; neither is it designed as an indictment. It is presented with the hope that by preserving a record of problems as well as accomplishments, future planners and commanders will benefit if an analagous situation should ever again face the United States Government.

ROBERT L. F. TARRELL, Colonel, USAF  
United States Air Attache, Vientiane, Laos

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- (8) AFXOOSO. . . . . 1
- (9) AFXOOSS. . . . . 1
- (10) AFXOOSV. . . . . 1
- (11) AFXOOTR. . . . . 1
- (12) AFXOOTW. . . . . 1
- (13) AFXOOTZ. . . . . 1
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- (15) AF/XOX . . . . . 6
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#### (1) HEADQUARTERS

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(b) XP. . . . . 2  
(c) DOCC. . . . . 1  
(d) DREA. . . . . 1  
(e) DIO. . . . . 1

#### (2) AIR FORCES

(a) 12AF  
    1. DOOF. . . . . 1  
    2. DI. . . . . 1  
(b) 19AF(DI). . . . . 1  
(c) USAFSOF(DO). . . . . 1

#### (3) WINGS

(a) 1SOW(DOI). . . . . 1  
(b) 23TFW(DOI). . . . . 1  
(c) 27TRW(DOI). . . . . 1  
(d) 33TFW(DOI). . . . . 1  
(e) 64TAW(DOI). . . . . 1  
(f) 67TRW(C). . . . . 1  
(g) 75TRW(DOI). . . . . 1  
(h) 316TAW(DOP). . . . . 1  
(i) 317TAW(EX). . . . . 1  
(j) 363TRW(DOI). . . . . 1  
(k) 464TFW(DOIN). . . . . 1  
(l) 474TFW(TFOW). . . . . 1  
(m) 479TFW(DOI). . . . . 1  
(n) 516TAW(DOPL). . . . . 1  
(o) 441OCCTW(DOTR). . . . . 1  
(p) 58TAC FTR TNG WG. . . . . 1  
(q) 4554CCTW(DOI). . . . . 1

#### (4) TAC CENTERS, SCHOOLS

(a) USAFTAWC(DA). . . . . 2  
(b) USAFTARC(DID). . . . . 2  
(c) USAFTALC(CAL). . . . . 1  
(d) USAFTFWC(CRC). . . . . 1  
(e) USAFAGOS(DAB-C). . . . . 1

### b. SAC

#### (1) HEADQUARTERS

(a) DOPL. . . . . 1  
(b) XPX. . . . . 1  
(c) DM. . . . . 1  
(d) IN. . . . . 1  
(e) OA. . . . . 1  
(f) HO. . . . . 1

#### (2) AIR FORCES

(a) 2AF(DICS). . . . . 1  
(b) 8AF(DO). . . . . 2  
(c) 15AF(DI). . . . . 1

### c. MAC

#### (1) HEADQUARTERS

(a) DOI. . . . . 1  
(b) DOO. . . . . 1  
(c) MACHO. . . . . 1  
(d) MACOA. . . . . 1

#### (2) AIR FORCES

(a) 22AF(OCXI). . . . . 1

#### (3) WINGS

(a) 61MAWg(OIN). . . . . 1  
(b) 62MAWg(OCXP). . . . . 1  
(c) 436MAWg(OCXC). . . . . 1  
(d) 437MAWg(OCXI). . . . . 1  
(e) 438MAWg(OCXC). . . . . 1

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(c) ACGS(CGO). . . . . 1

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## d. ADC

### (1) HEADQUARTERS

- (a) DO. . . . . 1
- (b) DOT. . . . . 1
- (c) XPC. . . . . 1

### (2) AIR DIVISIONS

- (a) 25AD(OIN) . . . . . 1
- (b) 29AD(ODC) . . . . . 1
- (c) 20AD(OIN) . . . . . 1

## e. ATC

- (1) ATXPP-X . . . . . 1

## f. AFLC

### (1) HEADQUARTERS

- (a) XOX . . . . . 1

## g. AFSC

### (1) HEADQUARTERS

- (a) XRP . . . . . 1
- (b) XRLW. . . . . 1
- (c) SAMSO(XRW). . . . . 1
- (d) SDA . . . . . 1
- (e) CSH . . . . . 2
- (f) DLXP. . . . . 1
- (g) ASD(ADJT) . . . . . 1
- (h) ESD(XO) . . . . . 1
- (i) RADC(EMOTL) . . . . . 2
- (j) ADTC(ADGT). . . . . 1
- (k) ADTC(SSLT). . . . . 1
- (l) ESD(YW) . . . . . 1

## h. USAFSS

### (1) HEADQUARTERS

- (a) ODC . . . . . 1
- (b) CHO . . . . . 1

### (2) SUBORDINATE UNITS

- (a) Eur Scty Rgn(OPD-P) . 1
- (b) 6940 Scty Wg(OOD) . . 1

## i. AAC

### (1) HEADQUARTERS

- (a) ALDOC-A. . . . . 1

## j. USAFSO

### (1) HEADQUARTERS

- (a) CSH. . . . . 1

## k. PACAF

### (1) HEADQUARTERS

- (a) DP . . . . . 1
- (b) IN . . . . . 1
- (c) XP . . . . . 2
- (d) CSH. . . . . 1
- (e) DOVD . . . . . 5
- (f) DC . . . . . 1
- (g) DM . . . . . 1

### (2) AIR FORCES

- (a) 5AF
  - 1. CSH . . . . . 1
  - 2. DPL . . . . . 1
- (b) Det 8, ASD(DOASD). . 1
- (c) 7AF
  - 1. DO. . . . . 1
  - 2. DIP . . . . . 1
  - 3. DPL . . . . . 1
  - 4. TACC. . . . . 1
  - 5. DOAC. . . . . 2
- (d) 13AF
  - 1. CSH . . . . . 1
  - 2. DI. . . . . 1
- (e) 7/13AF(CHECO). . . . 1

### (3) AIR DIVISIONS

- (a) 313AD(DOI) . . . . . 1
- (b) 314AD(DPL) . . . . . 2
- (c) 327AD
  - 1. DO. . . . . 1
  - 2. DI. . . . . 1
- (d) 834AD(DO). . . . . 2

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## (4) WINGS

(a) 8TFW(DCOA)	1
(b) 12TFW(DCOI)	1
(c) 35TFW(DCOI)	1
(d) 56SOW(WHD)	1
(e) 347TFW(DCOOT)	1
(f) 355TFW(DCOI)	1
(g) 366TFW(DCO)	1
(h) 388TFW(DCO)	1
(i) 405FW(DCOI)	1
(j) 432TRW(DCOI)	1
(k) 460TRW(DCOI)	1
(l) 475TFW(DCO)	1
(m) 1st Test Sq(A)	1

## (5) OTHER UNITS

(a) Task Force ALPHA(DXI)	1
(b) 504TASG(DO)	1
(c) Air Force Advisory Gp.	1

## 1. USAFE

### (1) HEADQUARTERS

(a) DOA	1
(b) DOLO	1
(c) DDO	1
(d) XDC	1

### (2) AIR FORCES

(a) 3AF(ODC)	2
(b) 16AF(ODC)	1
(c) 17AF(OID)	1

### (3) WINGS

(a) 36TFW(DCOID)	1
(b) 50TFW(DCO)	1
(c) 66TRW(DCOIN-T)	1
(d) 81TRW(DCOI)	1
(e) 401TFW(DCOI)	1
(f) 513TAW(OID)	1

### (4) GROUPS

(a) 497RTG(TRCOD)	5
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## 4. SEPARATE OPERATING AGENCIES

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(1) CMT	1
(2) DFH	1
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FOREWORD

This report supplements and in certain instances summarizes Project CHECO Reports which have described operations conducted by the Royal Laotian Air Force. These reports are:

- ~~(TS)~~ "USAF Operations from Thailand, 1964-65";
- ~~(TS)~~ "Air Operations, Thailand, 1966";
- ~~(TS/AFFO)~~ "USAF Operations from Thailand, 1 Jan 67 - 1 July 68";
- ~~(S/AFFO)~~ "Air Support to Counterinsurgency in Laos, 1 July 68 - 1 Nov 69";
- ~~(S/AFFO)~~ "Air Operations in Northern Laos, Nov 69 - Apr 70."

Certain specific ground and air operations, as well as overall command and control relationships, are discussed in greater detail by these reports. Primarily, this study on the Royal Lao Air Force has not appeared before in previous CHECO Reports. To understand the relationship of the RLAF to the overall free world effort in Southeast Asia, all pertinent reports should be consulted.

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## INTRODUCTION

### UNITED STATES ASSISTANCE TO LAOS AND THE RLAF

Economic assistance by the United States to the Royal Laotian Government (RLG) dates from 1950, when the Pentalateral Agreement of 23 December among the United States, Cambodia, France, Vietnam, and Laos initiated joint aid to support (in the words of the U.S. Secretary of State) the "free peoples" of Southeast Asia.<sup>1/</sup> When French predominance in Indochina ended with the Geneva Agreements of 1954 (which the United States did not sign), the U.S. began providing direct and increasing military support to anti-Communist Laotian forces.

The forms of this assistance varied. In December 1955, a Program Evaluation Office (PEO) was established to advise the Ambassador to Laos on requirements for and use of military equipment. Staffed by Department of Defense (DOD) civilians, this small group reported directly to the Commander-in-Chief, Pacific Command (CINCPAC). Although further Geneva Accords in 1956 stated that the French alone were to continue training the Lao, during the following year, an apparent lack of progress by the French-supervised Lao military necessitated reinstitution of the PEO, whose manning was increased from 10 to 60 authorized spaces.<sup>2/</sup>

The following year, according to one report, the alarming strength of left-wing factions in local elections indicated the "country appeared to be headed for a Communist takeover." Accordingly, the PEO staff was once more augmented, this time by active duty military personnel posing

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as civilians. By the end of 1959, PEO strength was as follows:<sup>3/</sup>

<u>Military</u>	<u>Civilian</u>	<u>Lao Civilian</u>	<u>Filipino Civilian</u>	<u>Total</u>
239	33	69	190	531

Of the total 239 military personnel, 17 were assigned as advisers to the Army Aviation Branch of the Royal Lao Forces Armees Royales (FAR).

The Laotian political upheavals of 1960, during which Neutralist Captain Kong Le controlled the official government from August to December before being ousted by the Right Wing General Phoumi Nosavan, marked the end of any serious effort by the French to train and support the RLG forces.<sup>4/</sup> Faced with increasing assistance by North Vietnam and the Soviet Union to the Leftist forces, the United States gave six T-6s to Laos in January 1961, and also replaced many PEO staff with 400 Special Forces personnel known as White Star Mobile Training Teams. According to one observer, it was at this time that United States policy toward support of Laos changed:<sup>5/</sup>

*"These efforts by Washington no longer had the previous objective of military defeating [of] the Pathet Lao....Now the American objective was to keep the Mekong Valley out of Pathet Lao control, thus easing the pressure on the Thai government, and consolidating a bargaining position vis-a-vis the Communist bloc in the increasingly likely event of a new international conference."*

Three months later, on 19 April 1961, what had actually been a clandestine Military Assistance Group (MAG) surfaced with the announcement

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that the U.S. Government was formally furnishing a uniformed Joint United States Military Assistance Group (JUSMAG) to Laos. Personnel strength, including civilians, reached a total of 1,220 advisers.<sup>6/</sup> It was established as a "G" staff with Army and Air Force elements, assisted by Filipinos.<sup>7/</sup>

At the same time, training of Lao units was initiated in Thailand, and in May, the Central Intelligence Agency, known as Controlled American Source (CAS), began training the Meo hill tribesmen in Military Region II and supervising their guerrilla operations.<sup>8/</sup> Shortly, the Meo would become the most aggressive and reliable military force in Laos.

After this U.S. show of force, the Communists agreed to negotiate, and the Geneva Accords of 23 July 1962, which stressed the neutrality of Laos, required the withdrawal of all foreign military personnel except a French contingent of instructors. On 17 September, JUSMAG, Laos, began its exit, and by 6 October the announcement was made that the last American military adviser had left.<sup>9/</sup> A total of 666 American personnel had departed.<sup>10/</sup>

It was obvious, however, that the Lao military could not resist Communist pressure with French assistance alone. As early as 5 September 1962, CINCPAC stated that "U.S. objectives required continued support to the FAR as an autonomous anti-Communist fighting force until such time as it was consolidated into the forces of a truly neutral Laotian government." As a result, the functions of a JUSMAG for Laos were divided

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into three categories which, with only slight revision, continued to exist for the next eight years. The division was as follows:<sup>11/</sup>

1. Requirements Office, United States Agency for International Development (RO/USAID) which operated in-country as an integral part of USAID/LAOS and reported to the Director, USAID Laos.
2. Deputy Chief, JUSMAG, Thailand (DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI), a headquarters located in Bangkok, Thailand, and known as the "MAG in exile," reported directly to CINCPAC.
3. Augmented attache staffs whose members wore civilian clothes and who provided intelligence data and assisted in operational requirements.

By December 1962, Secretary of State Dean Rusk had defined the Terms of Reference (TOR) for the requirements staff. Tasked to prepare recommendations concerning the Military Assistance Program for Laos and the size and composition of the Lao military budget requirements, the small RO office (26 assigned technicians on hand in 1970)<sup>12/</sup> was responsible for overseeing the procedures for military requisitioning, supply, budget, and third-country training.<sup>13/</sup> With establishment of the DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI office in 1963, the new machinery to provide continued military support to the Royal Lao Government was in operation.<sup>14/</sup> To support the Royal Lao Air Force, this "joint administrative organization," as a former RO chief called it,<sup>15/</sup> was allotted \$4,218,148 of the FY 63 total military aid budget of approximately \$15 million (Fig. 1).<sup>16/</sup> (CAS expenditures have not been revealed in this amount.)

Within two years, the increased level of U.S. military involvement

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in the Indochina war necessitated further personnel augmentation. As Army and Air Force attaches (ARMA and AIRA) began assuming more and more of the advisory role, first TDY, then PCS, military officers and enlisted men were assigned under cover to DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI with duty stations in Laos. Concurrently, third country training was increased, with the Thai T-6 program at Kokatien and Korat replaced by the U.S.-operated Project WATERPUMP which provided T-28 instruction at Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base. With Thai government approval secured in February 1964,<sup>17/</sup> the first TDY T-28 instructor pilots and their flyaway kits arrived at Udorn on 16 March 1964,<sup>18/</sup> as did C-47 and H-34 training cadres. After April 1965, U.S. personnel at Udorn were assigned PCS.<sup>19/</sup> Concurrently, proposals were made in late 1965 that U.S. active duty military advisers be sent PCS to Laos to further supplement the AIRA, ARMA, and RO/USAID staff. These personnel were supposed to be responsive militarily to DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI because of the undercover nature of the MAP. They were actually under the operational control of AIRA and ARMA.

By mid-1966, the program known as "Project 404" was approved.<sup>20/</sup> For the next two years, nearly all of the USAF augmentees were assigned in Laos on a one-year PCS tour.

In 1968, the United States Ambassador to Laos requested that certain USAF personnel who were to man the forward sites and RLAF bases once more be assigned TDY from the United States Air Force Special Operations Force (USAFSOF) resources at Eglin AFB, Florida,<sup>21/</sup> and by October, the pattern of United States assistance to the Royal Lao Air Force was stabilized.

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# US MILITARY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM TRENDS

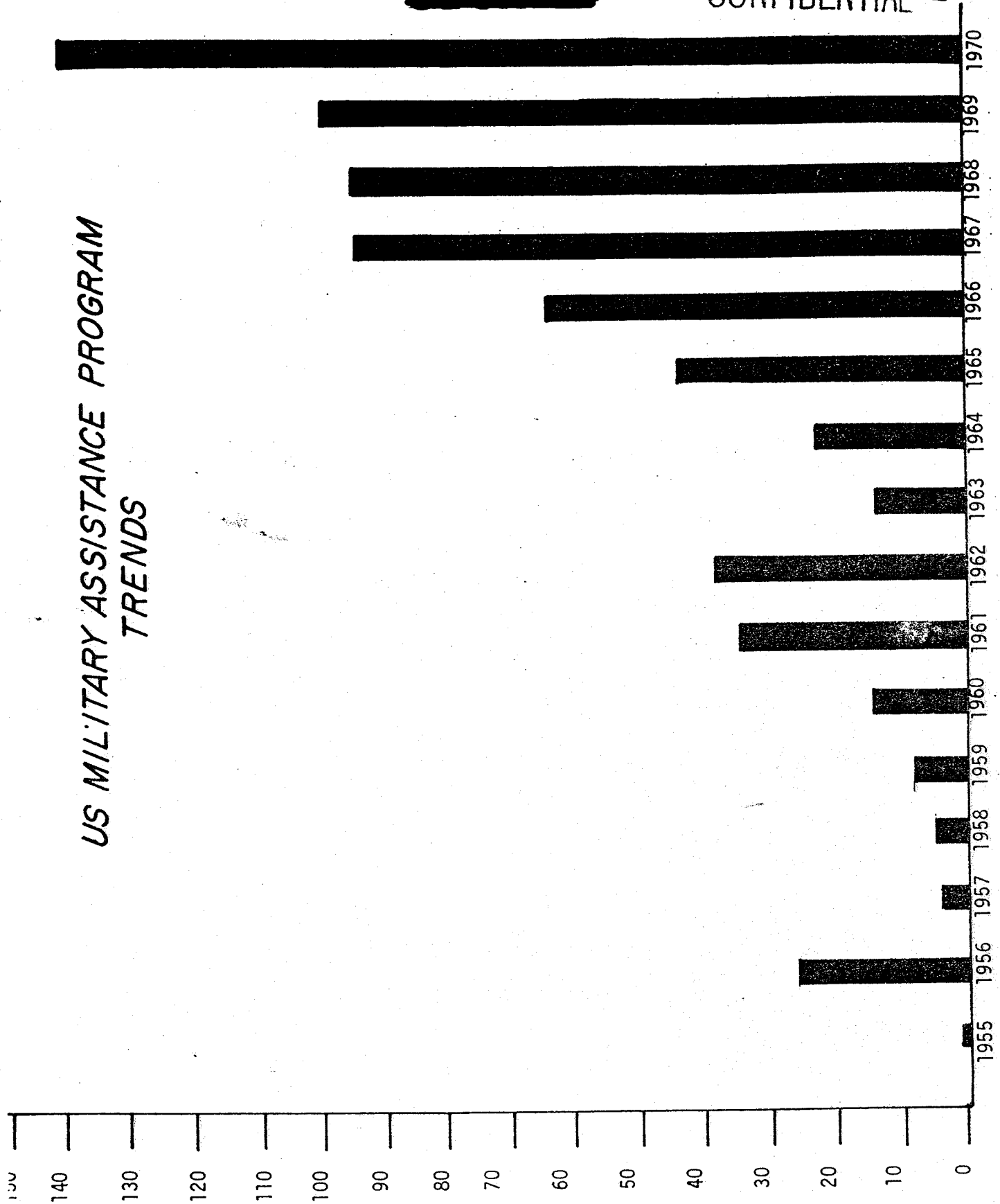


Figure I

Source: DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI



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Only the numbers were to change. In 1970, PCS USAF personnel in civilian clothes worked in Vientiane with the attache and RO/USAID staffs, as well as with the TDY SOF advisers who usually manned key positions in the field. Uniformed USAF officers instructed in T-28s and C-47s at Udorn, and supply, support, and funding matters were handled by RO/USAID through DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI.

In May 1970, U.S. personnel involved in the three basic units of the Military Assistance Service Funded (MASF) for Laos numbered as follows (not included are CAS, SOF, or Udorn-assigned people):<sup>22/</sup>

DEPCHIEF		PROJECT 404		RO	
<u>Authorized</u>	<u>On Hand</u>	<u>Authorized</u>	<u>On Hand</u>	<u>Authorized</u>	<u>On Hand</u>
122	134	119*	88	30	28**

This organization was responsible for directing and administering the Military Aid Program (MAP) which, for FY 71, was programmed at \$208.14 million with a planned increase to and stabilization at \$212.91 million until FY 76.<sup>23/</sup> Figure 2 shows how the aid program to Laos was organized from a former Deputy Chief's viewpoint.

#### U.S. Objectives in Laos

With the United States' goal in Laos being "to maintain a stable, independent, and neutralist government, free from external aggression,"<sup>24/</sup>

\*Have requested an additional 51 American personnel.

\*\*Two of these positions are not related to RO activities (CAS).

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the specific objectives of the Commander-in-Chief, Pacific Command,  
were threefold:<sup>25/</sup>

- . To support the armed forces of the Royal Lao Government in their effort to defeat insurgency in areas that are or may come under RLG control.
- . To disrupt the flow of North Vietnamese forces and material into the Republic of Vietnam.
- . To support the Royal Lao Government and to assist it to maintain its policy of nonalignment.

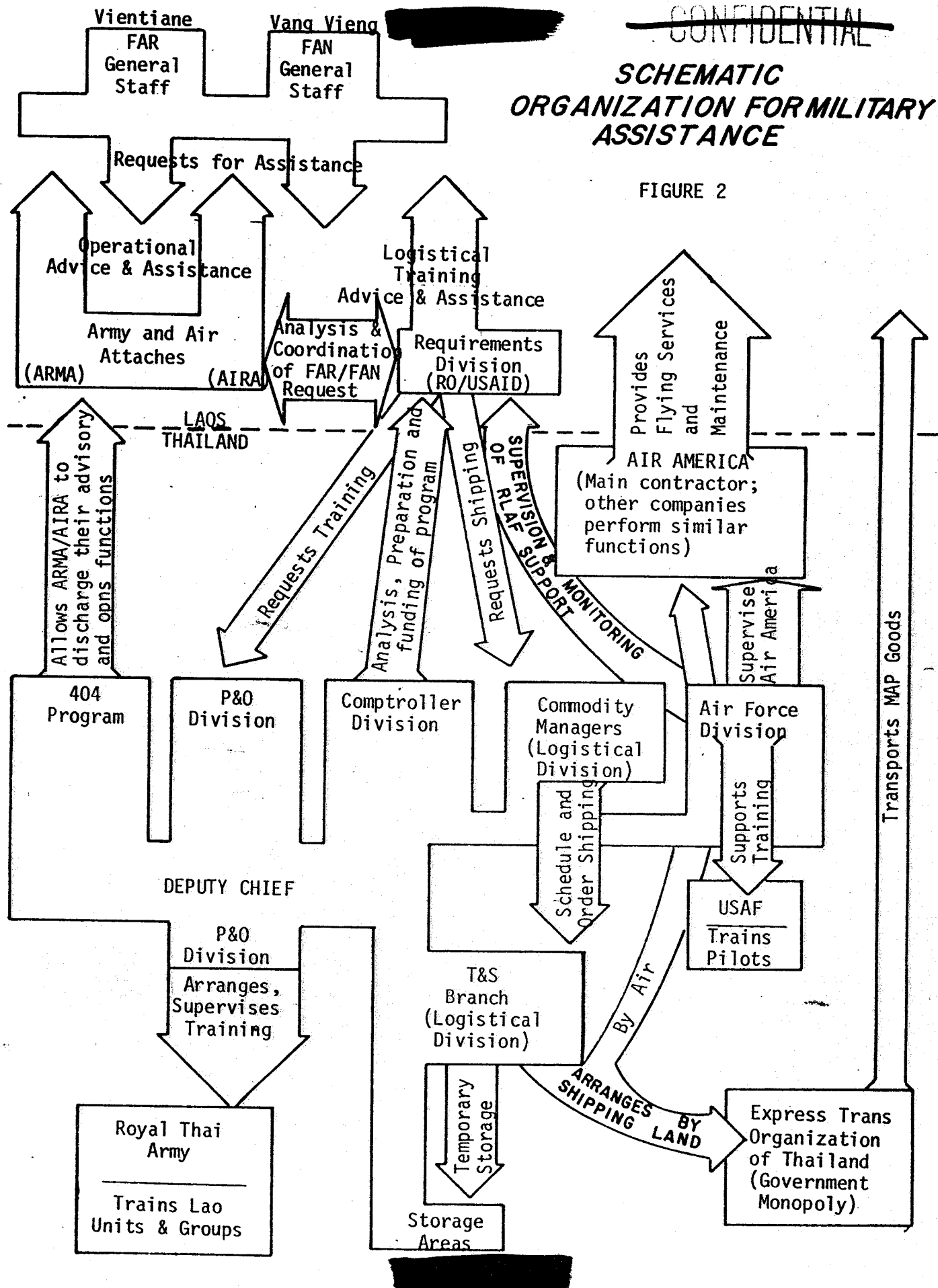
To fulfill these objectives, the stated intention of DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI was to build "an effective Air Force within Laos, while simultaneously supporting active combat operations within the country."<sup>26/</sup> Stating that the undercover nature of the Military Assistance Program resulted from U.S. desires first not to appear to be violating the Geneva Accords and second "not to really get involved," a two-term air attache expressed a widely held view: "Whoever controls the RLAF has control of the political situation in Laos."<sup>27/</sup> Phrased another way, the importance of the RLAF lay in the fact that it had "often proved to be the larger part of the (Lao) war effort, and frequently the only viable military force capable of engaging the enemy."<sup>28/</sup>

The report which follows documents results of the continuously increasing U.S. support to the Royal Laotian Air Force.

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# SCHEMATIC ORGANIZATION FOR MILITARY ASSISTANCE

FIGURE 2



CHAPTER I

THE EARLY YEARS -- 1954-1964

Fourteen years after the Army Aviation Branch of the FAR came into being with the Geneva Accords of 1954, the mission of the Royal Lao Air Force was: <sup>1/</sup>

*"...to support the national policies and objectives of the Royal Lao Government. The primary roles of the RLAF in carrying out its mission are twofold: (1) to train, organize, and maintain a stable military structure in a country where instability is the rule rather than the exception; and (2) conduct military operations in support of a government that is actually at war."*

Although the ability of the RLAF to fulfill either of its roles was questionable enough in 1968, for the first ten years of its existence such a capability was utterly inconceivable. Until the abruptly increased U.S. support in March through May 1964, the RLAF was little more than a token air force, its few transport, liaison, and strike aircraft used alternately for typically Asian "shows of force" or to airlift small numbers of troops and cargo (more often than not gold and opium) to and from the dozens of tiny, remote landing fields known as Lima or Lima/STOL sites. There were few Lao pilots; none had been trained by the French prior to the Geneva Accords; and when the Royal Lao Army officially came into being in 1954, a handful of newly promoted Lao officers received flight instruction at locations such as the T-6 school at Marrakech, Morocco, or the twin engine school at Avord, France. <sup>2/</sup>

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With the command vacuum created by the departure of the French army, it is little wonder that the early years of the Aviation Branch showed little direction and less demonstrable success. As former enlisted men or members of the powerful Laotian families became instant commanders, what early organization there was in the Lao military followed the familial and political power patterns. From 1957-1960, the first Aviation Branch Commander, Brigadier General Sourith, was a regular FAR officer, had been trained in light planes by the French, and according to Lao pilots, did little, if any, flying himself. He was known, however, to be extremely loyal to his commanders.

For assets, the Aviation Branch possessed only six C-47 transports which have been called a "handful of light reconnaissance aircraft." Officially described as "small by western standards," such a force was considered "sufficient for the job at hand."<sup>3/</sup> To support the requirements of the rapidly changing governments during this period, the Aviation Branch aircraft resorted to ingenious, occasionally humorous tactics. At times, a C-47 with a specially devised rack mounted in the door was used to dispense both bombs and flares,<sup>4/</sup> and for a short while, the RLAF possessed the first gunship to be used in the Indochina war. One of the L-20 Beavers was equipped with a .50 caliber side-firing machine gun, but according to one of the pilots who flew it, "when the gun shot, it was very, very bumpy, and we had to fly too low in order to hit anything."<sup>5/</sup> A smaller .30 caliber gun was equally unsuccessful, and the idea was abandoned.

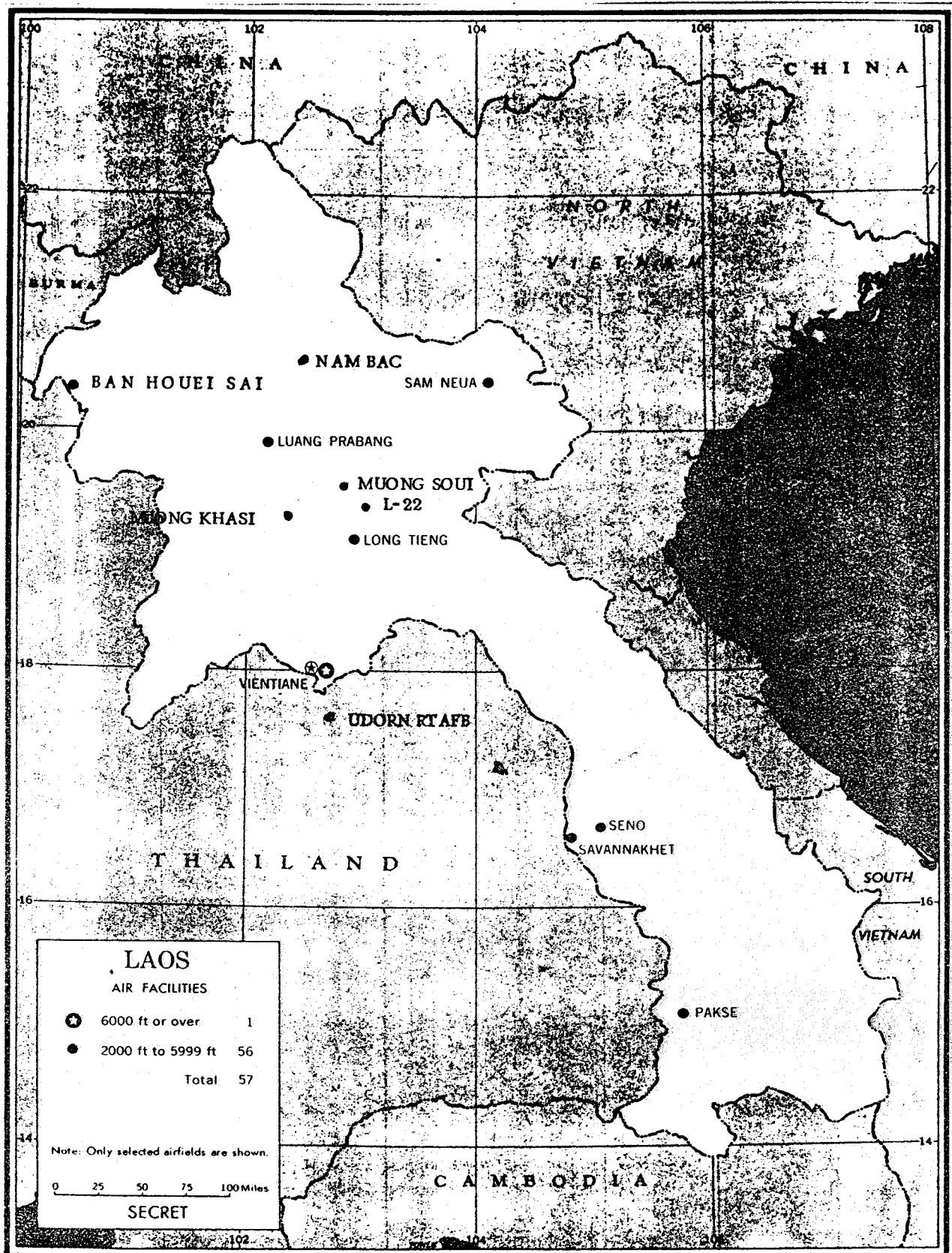


Figure 3

Until the arrival of the first T-6s, air operations usually consisted mainly of troop and supply transport missions. In 1959, for instance, L-20s and C-47s were used to reinforce and resupply beleaguered RLG forces at Sam Neua, but it was not until January 1961 that the newly designated Royal Air Force possessed any real strike capability at all.

Phoumi and Major Ma

In August 1960, the Neutralist Capt. Kong Le staged his short-lived but significant coup against the right-wing faction, with the result that the powerful Gen. Phoumi Nosavan fled to Savannakhet after using one of the Aviation Branch C-47s to drop leaflets which denounced Kong Le and declared a new government was in being.<sup>6/</sup> Savannakhet, situated in an area which offered a political, as well as a geographical sanctuary, also possessed the second best runway in Laos. Flying with General Phoumi was the newly promoted Major Theo Ma, an ex-paratrooper who had fought at Dien Bien Phu, had been trained in T-6s by the French, and who would rise to Brigadier General, command the RLAF, lead an air attack on his own capital, and flee the country--all within the next six years. From 1960 to late 1966, the story of the RLAF is also the story of the rise and fall of General Ma.

During the few months that Kong Le and his paratroopers controlled Vientiane, U.S. support to Laos took diverse forms. At first, the U.S. Ambassador to Laos opted for support to Kong Le's Neutralist faction, but the increasing evidence that the captain might negotiate with the Communist Pathet Lao led to a decision by Washington to build up General

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Phoumi. Accordingly, from September through December, increasing numbers of Air America (the CAS directed) contract airline based at Udorn RTAFB)--C-46s and C-47s flew military supplies to Savannakhet. At the same time, the Russian IL-14s began airlifting artillery and North Vietnamese gun crews to bolster Kong Le's troops. From 13-16 December 1961, the most violent fighting Laos had yet seen erupted in Vientiane, the result of which was a Phoumi victory and Kong Le's withdrawal to the Pathet Lao-dominated Plaine des Jarres (PDJ). Officially, Laos now possessed a conservative, United States-oriented government.

There was evidence of sharply increased Soviet and North Vietnamese support to the newly formed Kong Le-Pathet Lao alliance which had turned the PDJ into an armed camp, complete with 37-mm antiaircraft artillery (AAA). As a result, the U.S. sent the first six T-6 converted trainers to the RLAF Phoumist forces at Vientiane. <sup>7/</sup>

It was at this time, January 1961, that the Royal Lao Air Force, as such, came into being. The T-6s were equipped with 5-inch rocket launchers and .30 caliber machine guns. Shortly afterward, T-6 instruction for Lao pilots was initiated at Kokatiem, Thailand. One of the first Lao pilots described the training this way: <sup>8/</sup>

*"I was a member of the second T-6 class in 1961-62. Thirteen entered my class, but only eight were graduated. The first class graduated 12 out of 13. I received 11 hours of L-19 time at Kokatiem. The instructors there were all Thai. Then I went to Korat for six months in the T-6, then back to Kokatiem for gunnery."*



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Final approach at Pakse.  
FIGURE 4

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The first complete T-6 class was graduated in March 1962,<sup>9/</sup> with the second following in June. The course, including gunnery, lasted for 11 months.<sup>10/</sup>

In 1961, however, the need for strike operations was immediate. Consequently, the initial six French-trained T-6 pilots were supplemented<sup>11/</sup> by Thai aircrews who flew strikes from Vientiane and later Luang Prabang. According to the RLAF Chief of Operations, the first T-6 missions were flown around Vientiane against the Neutralists, often within 30 miles of the capital. Ground fire was frequent, with the first recorded RLAF combat loss occurring in late January or early February 1961. The pilot had completed only ten missions. A total of five T-6s were lost prior to being replaced by the T-28s, as were three pilots, [one of whom was Thai.]<sup>12/</sup> Of the first six Lao T-6 pilots, only one was still alive in 1970; the others had been lost in combat.<sup>13/</sup>

At Savannakhet, an embryonic RLAF training school was being formed, offering initial flight instruction with what a former Instructor Pilot (IP) called "the French plan":<sup>14/</sup>

*"We had six O-1s. We gave the students 25-30 hours, then sent them solo. Afterwards, the students went to Korat for T-6 school, stayed at Savannakhet for C-47 training, or went to the United States."*

With Thai and Lao aircrews flying combat sorties from Vientiane, the Lao pilots also flew training missions to increase their proficiency.<sup>15/</sup> The first recorded Lao T-6 training flight took place on 15 June 1961.

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As their confidence and ability increased, the RLAF crews began to operate farther afield, staging from Luang Prabang and Houei Sai, in northwestern Laos. In one of the operations near Nam Tha, only a few miles from the Chinese Border, the only known RLAF air-to-air combat occurred when Lieutenant Khampanh, orbiting his T-6 at 9,000 feet, attacked a Russian IL-14 with rockets. According to another RLAF pilot, two enemy crew members were killed and one engine of the transport was shot out, but the IL-14 limped back to Hanoi. <sup>16/</sup>

In late 1961, the T-6s, were staging out of Luang Prabang, Muong Sing, Houei Sai, Paksane, Thakhek, Pakse, Attapeu, and Saravane, but on many occasions, the missions appeared to have been flown primarily to demonstrate the Royal Lao Government's presence in areas becoming slowly infested with anti-government forces. In October 1961, for instance, four T-6s deployed from Savannakhet to Pakse, landing on the 26th for a two-month stay. The then Chief of Operations at Pakse said: <sup>17/</sup>

*"Our job was to clean up the south part of Laos. Targeting came from the MR IV Commander, General Koth, and we worked closely with the FAR. Although we had no radio contact with the ground forces, we used ground markers--arrows, smoke, or marking by mortar to show the target. We worked around Attapeu and the area of Lao Nam south to the border. As a result, we opened the road from Saravane to Pakse, but only for military trucks. We used O-1s and U-6s for observation. Ground fire was small, except that there was some 50 calibre. No aircraft were lost and none were hit. It was very windy most of the time."*

Flight records showed the four T-6s did not fly immediately upon arrival at Pakse, but on 28 and 29 October conducted what were called

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"combat checkout and strafe missions." On 30 October, the first planned strikes were flown, with the resulting entry made in the log that "the enemy was destroyed." During November, sorties averaged one per day per aircraft, but by the end of the operation, the T-6s were flying twice daily.<sup>18/</sup>

By the end of 1961, the RLAF had 721 officers and airmen on its rolls.<sup>19/</sup> Despite the somewhat relaxed aura which surrounded many of its operations, the existence of air support to RLG ground forces marked a definite turning point in what had been a continuous power struggle among the various factions which made up the kingdom of Laos. At one time, the Soviet Union protested to the United States when the T-6s strafed Kong Le-Pathet Lao forces along Route 13,<sup>20/</sup> but no satisfactory documentation of the effectiveness of RLAF close air support was possible. In early January 1962, for instance, repeated T-6 strikes were unable to silence a Pathet Lao mortar which was firing on the besieged government stronghold of Nam Tha.<sup>21/</sup> Shortly afterward, the town was overrun, and another RLG position was lost.

With the ability of the T-6s to deploy with relative rapidity from one military region to another, a pattern did emerge which would affect RLAF operations well into the future. Once in place at Pakse or Luang Prabang, for instance, the aircraft came under command of the local FAR Military Region Commander, and as happened in the late 1961 missions from Pakse, the effectiveness of targeting, command, and control depended upon the ability and political orientation of this one man. In later years,

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regional autonomy would greatly affect the performance and capability of the RLAF.

Operations in 1962 continued much as they had during the previous year, but the RLAF was steadily growing in size and experience. In 1962, the first 12 student pilots were graduated from the 0-1 training school at Savannakhet,<sup>22/</sup> and the first four RLAF officers were sent to the United States for T-28 Undergraduate Pilot Training. A total of 12 officers and 3 airmen were CONUS-trained that year.<sup>23/</sup>

No accurate aircraft attrition figures are available for losses, but as a T-6 was lost, it was replaced from Thai resources to maintain RLAF strength at six.<sup>24/</sup>

The minimal amount of airpower now possessed by the RLG did not stem the advance of the Pathet Lao troops, augmented by North Vietnamese cadres and artillery. Consequently, after the Geneva Accords of July 1962, the dozen or so combat pilots of the RLAF entered into their second phase, one which began slowly but ended with an abrupt leap into the modern age.

#### Emergence of General Ma

After the Geneva Agreements, the organization of the RLAF was established as outlined in Figure 5. Colonel Ma, a boyish-looking man of about 30, had established himself early as a pilot's pilot. Trained in France from 1957 to 1959, he nevertheless harbored little love for his previous superiors. According to one source, as a company commander in the French-Lao Union Army he had parachuted into Dien Bien Phu, and when

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the cause was known to be lost, the French told Ma to take care of himself. Subsequently, he took his company and fought his way to Luang Prabang.<sup>25/</sup> Considered by most Americans who knew him as the most patriotic member of the Lao military, Ma believed in strict honesty at all levels of the RLAF and sincerely desired to build his air force into a truly effective arm of the military. Unfortunately, two factors were to create severe problems for General Ma and the RLAF. For a country such as Laos, which possessed a heritage of gold and opium smuggling, Ma was honest to a fault. Second, his training had been as a field leader and as a pilot; he knew little about command requirements and less about administration. Moody, intense, emotional, Ma had almost no use for anyone who was not a fighter pilot. A close friend later said:<sup>26/</sup>

*"After 1960, General Ma tried to expand the Air Force to make it bigger, but he did not know how to manage his people and materiel. He began to talk, talk, talk, and became more like a strong man after the move to Savannakhet. Not at first, but later. He wanted to set himself up as a Number One of the Air Force. He knew about Ky [Nguyen Cao Ky, the first VNAF Commander], and I think he wanted to be like him. He talked about it and made comparisons."*

Another officer, one of the first three RLAF H-34 pilots, agreed: "I went to the same schools in France with Ma...we used to sleep in the same room. But after he began to fly the T-28, it was as if he did not know anyone at all, if he did not fly the T-28."<sup>27/</sup>

While Colonel Ma commanded only his small fleet of six T-6s at Savannakhet, there were few problems. At the same time, however, he

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failed to gain effective control of the remainder of his growing air force. Immediately after the Geneva Agreements, the Russians, who had been supplying the Pathet Lao - Kong Le forces, began to train Lao pilots, but at Vientiane. In December 1962, the first of nine programmed Soviet IL-2 twin engine transports were turned over to the Royal Lao Government, and according to one observer, three were to be used by the Phoumist, three by the Neutralist, and three by the Pathet Lao members of the coalition government. Russian instructors worked with Lao crews, with the aviation gas being furnished by U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).<sup>28/</sup> An RLAF officer stationed at Vientiane remembered the brief stay by the Soviet pilots:<sup>29/</sup>

*"The Russians had no training program at all. All they did was fly with us. At that time, we also had three AN-2 Colts which I flew. The Russians and the Lao could not understand each other. They had only one interpreter. The Russians only stayed six months. Afterwards, one IL-2 crashed in the PDJ; the others stopped flying because of parts. They are still at Vientiane, junked."*

At Savannakhet, Colonel Ma seemed impervious to the growing political schism which was developing between the left and right wing factions of the government as the Russian influence on the Pathet Lao gave way to that of the more militant North Vietnamese.<sup>30/</sup>

As the Pathet Lao began to show more and more dominance over the Neutralist third of the coalition, and the North Vietnamese began constructing airfields in Pathet Lao-controlled areas, the U.S. implemented its plan to replace the T-6s with T-28s. Given final checkouts by U.S. instructors at Kokatiem, the four CONUS trained T-28 pilots flew

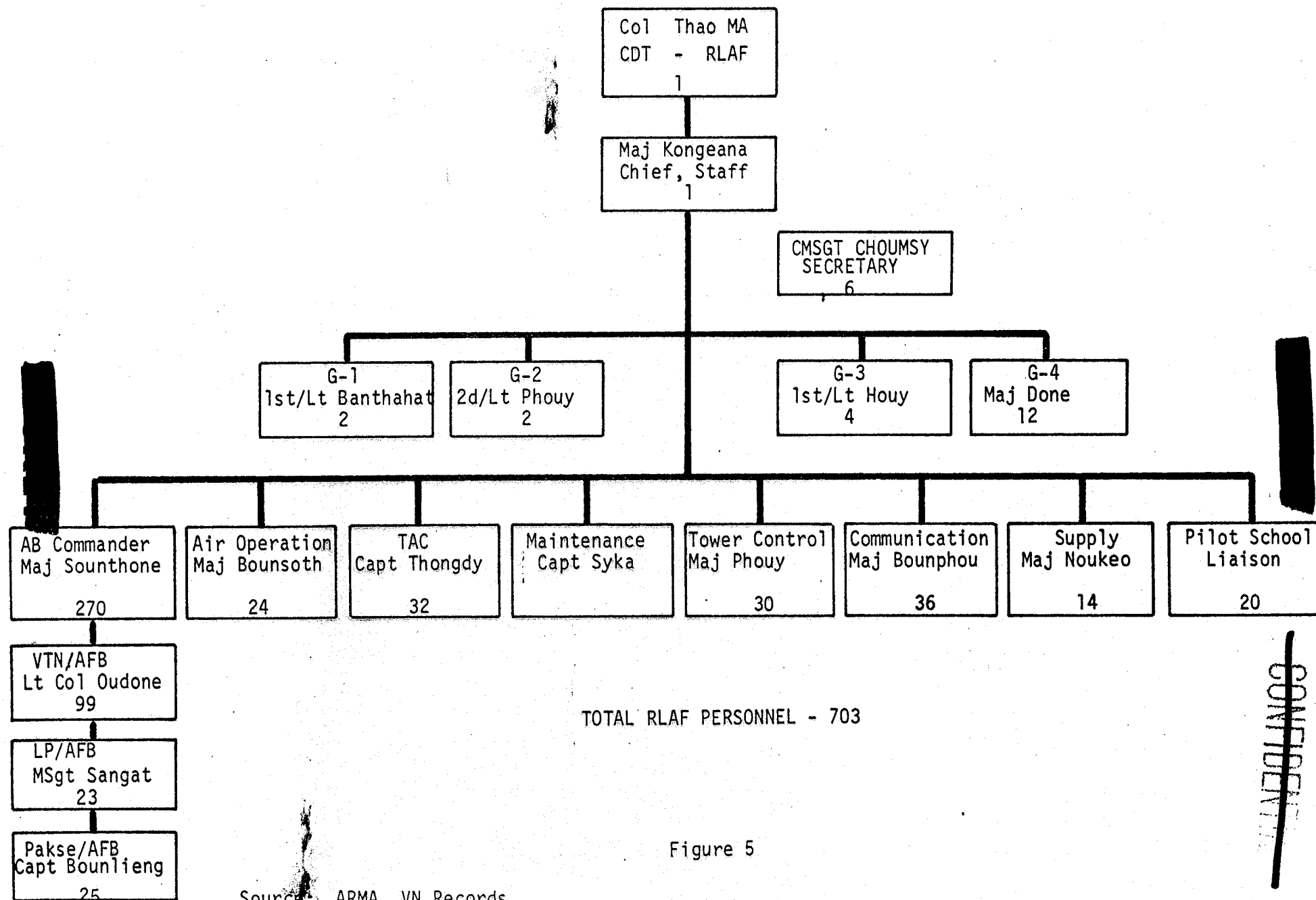


Figure 5

Source: ARMA, VN Records

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the new aircraft back to Savannakhet. An RLAF officer said, "One of the main reasons for the change was the increasing AAA threat." He also added that the few remaining T-6s which were still flyable were returned to Kokatiem by American pilots. Immediately, a T-28 upgrading program was started at Savannakhet, with Colonel Ma, who had been checked out at Kokatiem, doing much of the flying.<sup>31/</sup> RLAF T-28 operations dated from August 1963, when the records showed 52 hours and 5 minutes logged. That month, RLAF C-47s flew 223:00 hours and the utility aircraft logged 71:50 hours.<sup>32/</sup>

The RLAF now possessed not only a faster strike aircraft, but also one which could carry up to six 500-pound bombs or a variety of other ordnance. The T-6s had not been originally configured to carry bombs. The Air Attache said that bombs were supplied to the RLAF for the T-28s, "but we kept the fuses at Udorn."<sup>33/</sup> As had happened with the T-6, the T-28s were restricted to using only their .50 caliber machine guns and rockets.<sup>34/</sup>

Later in the year, partly because the RLAF training school at Savannakhet had produced only five candidates for further upgrading, the first USAF Mobile Training Team (MTT) was established at Udorn to train Lao pilots in the U-17 prior to checking them out in the H-34.<sup>35/</sup> From a high of 21 helicopters authorized to support JUSMAG, Laos, the number had dropped to four in early 1963, but in September, coincident with the transfer of the T-28s, the program once again began to expand.<sup>36/</sup>

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Unfortunately, as an RLAF officer said later, "Ma did not care about helicopters."<sup>37/</sup>

In the early months of 1964, as the Laotian political situation steadily worsened, at least 13 Lao pilots were receiving T-28 training at Kokatiem, including the future Chief of Staff of the RLAF, Lt. Colonel T. Xeuam.<sup>38/</sup> On orders dated 11 February 1964, the first three RLAF pilots to fly the H-34 began training in March, the month which also saw the arrival of the C-47 MTT and the USAF T-28 Detachment 6, 1st Air Combat Wing, known as Project WATERPUMP.

Project WATERPUMP consisted of four T-28s and their flyaway kits, and, according to the Air Attache at that time, was housed in the back of the Air America hangar at Udorn. The Air Attache remembered being greeted by the first WATERPUMP Commander: "He was waiting on the ramp when we landed our C-47 at Udorn. He came up to me and said, 'At your service, sir.'"<sup>39/</sup>

With the RLAF T-28 strength now increased to six aircraft, as enough pilots became qualified to fly them, operations consisted primarily of training and reconnaissance flights. Politically, not only were there signs of growing dissension in the field between the Neutralists and the Pathet Lao, as the North Vietnamese began to exert more and more control, but there were problems within the Vientiane government as well. On 19 April 1964, the Commander of Military Region V, General Kouprasith, attempted a coup against Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma. Holding Souvanna

briefly under house arrest, the conservative generals charged that the International Control Commission was incapable of overseeing the cease-fire and that the coalition government was a sham. When U.S. pressure in support of Souvanna was exerted, the coup attempt failed, and General Kouprasith quickly reaffirmed his support of the Souvanna government.<sup>40/</sup> Not so General Phoumi, who had remained in Savannakhet and had not changed his mind about the inefficacy of the coalition. His breach with the government continued to widen until in February 1965, his final coup attempt would cause his exile to Thailand.<sup>41/</sup>

During this period of political maneuvering, General Ma (his promotion had become effective on 1 January 1964) remained aloof. According to the air attache, Ma was distressed to find that his name, along with that of Phoumi and Kouprasith, had been circulated as being on the Revolutionary Committee for the April coup.<sup>42/</sup>

General Ma stayed with his 12 pilots and six T-28s at Savannakhet, but he did not have much time to brood. Apparently, he alone, had properly gauged the intentions of the Pathet Lao. Ma had told the Air Attache there would be a push against the Neutralists, but when the attache passed the information on to the Embassy, the Ambassador to Laos stated there were no other indications of a pending offensive.<sup>43/</sup> On 16 May, Pathet Lao and "Dissident" Neutralists attacked positions occupied by Kong Le's troops. Under the guise of a mutiny within Kong Le's own forces, and taking advantage of the recent turmoil in Vientiane, Pathet

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Lao soldiers quickly overran most of the points which had been held by Kong Le since the Geneva Accords. <sup>44/</sup>

<sup>45/</sup>  
The Attache added:

*"General Ma said the Neuts wouldn't fight. Ma thought they would join the enemy. When the offensive came, the Neuts did not fight, but they didn't defect either. Even though they dropped all their weapons and ran, they eventually made it back to Site 15. At that time, there was the same large concern about the government collapsing as there would be in 1969 and 1970. No one knew how far the enemy was planning to go."*

With dissension in Vientiane, bombs without fuses, and a commander who was already at odds with all factions of the government, the RLAF was about to come of age.

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## CHAPTER II

### END OF THE MA DYNASTY - 1964-1966

With the enemy attacks of May 1964, the need for an expanded RLAF close air support capability was obvious. In the next two-and-one-half years, U.S. financial assistance was to increase threefold, USAF aircraft would begin bombing in Laos, more U.S. personnel would be introduced in-country, and the RLAF strike sortie rate would jump from 96 sorties in May 1964 to a high of 1,014 combat sorties <sup>1/</sup> (including those of the Thai pilots) in January 1966. Yet, at the end of this third phase of RLAF development, after the 21 October 1966 bombing of Vientiane and the exile of General Ma, the 33 T-28 aircraft available for training and combat would be identical to the number possessed in September 1964, and while the combat ready pilots' strength had more than doubled from 13 to 33, <sup>2/</sup> the end of 1966 would see the RLAF as a fragmented force which lacked direction, motivation, and above all, effective leadership at all levels.

The reasons for these problems are complex. First, the reintroduction of Thai pilots to support Laotian ground operations created another autonomous group within an already disparate military structure. Also aircraft losses were heavy, from combat as well as accidents. Third, the divided structure of the clandestine MAP did not permit dynamic planning, close supervision, or development of concerted training and upgrading techniques. Finally, exemplifying both a cause and an effect of the peculiar nature of Laotian politics, there was General Ma, who

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controlled his air force like a team of palace guards. His particular brand of leadership, much of it a result of his deepening rift with the FAR commanders, produced a divided RLAF: there were some T-28 pilots who fanatically supported him, whereas disapproval of General Ma took diverse forms from others of the air force. From 1964 to 1966, many dedicated young Lao pilots flew and died in military operations conducted by their government, but even though progress had been made, the RLAF was a long way from self-sufficiency.

At first, the crash program to upgrade the RLAF produced amazing results. When Project WATERPUMP was established, the USAF pilots had two basic purposes: first, to train Lao crew-members, and second, to be used for "emergencies" at the Ambassador's discretion.<sup>3/</sup> In May 1964, a full-scale emergency existed. Accordingly, the first admitted USAF "reconnaissance flights" were authorized over Laos (actually, RT-33s had flown similar reconnaissance flights from Don Muang RTAFB from April to November 1961).<sup>4/</sup> The decision was also made at this time to augment the RLAF by reintroducing Thai strike pilots. On 17 May, the second day of the Pathet Lao offensive, the U.S. Ambassador to Laos authorized the T-28s to use 100- and 500-pound bombs. The following day, all four WATERPUMP T-28s were loaned to the RLAF, leaving the Udorn training detachment without aircraft. Replacement arrived on 22 May, six T-28s and four RT-28Ds from the Republic of Vietnam, the latter aircraft to be used for reconnaissance and training.<sup>5/</sup>

The Air Attache recalled the events of those frenzied days:<sup>6/</sup>

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*"When WATERPUMP was started, there was no real plan. There were many logistics problems--there were no vehicles, for instance, and everything was scrounged. Some people would come up for a week, three weeks, a month's TDY from MACV. If we got a man with a two-month TDY we knew we had some continuity. People were coming in from all over at all times. There was no real plan.*

*"You should have seen the way we trained them [the Lao pilots]. The WATERPUMP birds were a different model than the Lao had been flying, with a different cockpit configuration. We took four pilots and piled them into the airplane after giving them a basic ground briefing. Then we all flew to Vientiane, and that afternoon they dropped the first bombs on the PDJ."*

When use of Thai T-28 pilots-under the code word FIREFLY was authorized on 21 May, General Ma was not convinced that Lao and Thai pilots would work well together. As a result, the Thais were placed under operational control of the U.S. Air Attache in Vientiane,<sup>7/</sup> and an embryonic Air Operations Center (AOC) was established at Wattay Airport.<sup>8/</sup> One RLAF pilot said:

*"I knew the AOC building at Vientiane existed, but no RLAF worked there. Only U.S. and Thai personnel. There was an RLAF Liaison/Observer only. I think that was what General Ma wanted."*

In retrospect, it is probable that General Ma desired U.S. control for more reasons than just USAF operational expertise. Vientiane's Wattay Airport, from which the General's aircraft were to fly in defense of the PDJ, was within a FAR stronghold; and Ma preferred to have United States' personnel rather than the local generals in charge. Later, in the

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presence of the Prime Minister, General Ma would be told that the RLAF was "not an independent service as USAF," but was an arm of the General Staff. He was, according to the generals, allowed to call his air force the RLAF only because "it suited U.S. MAP structure better."<sup>9/</sup>

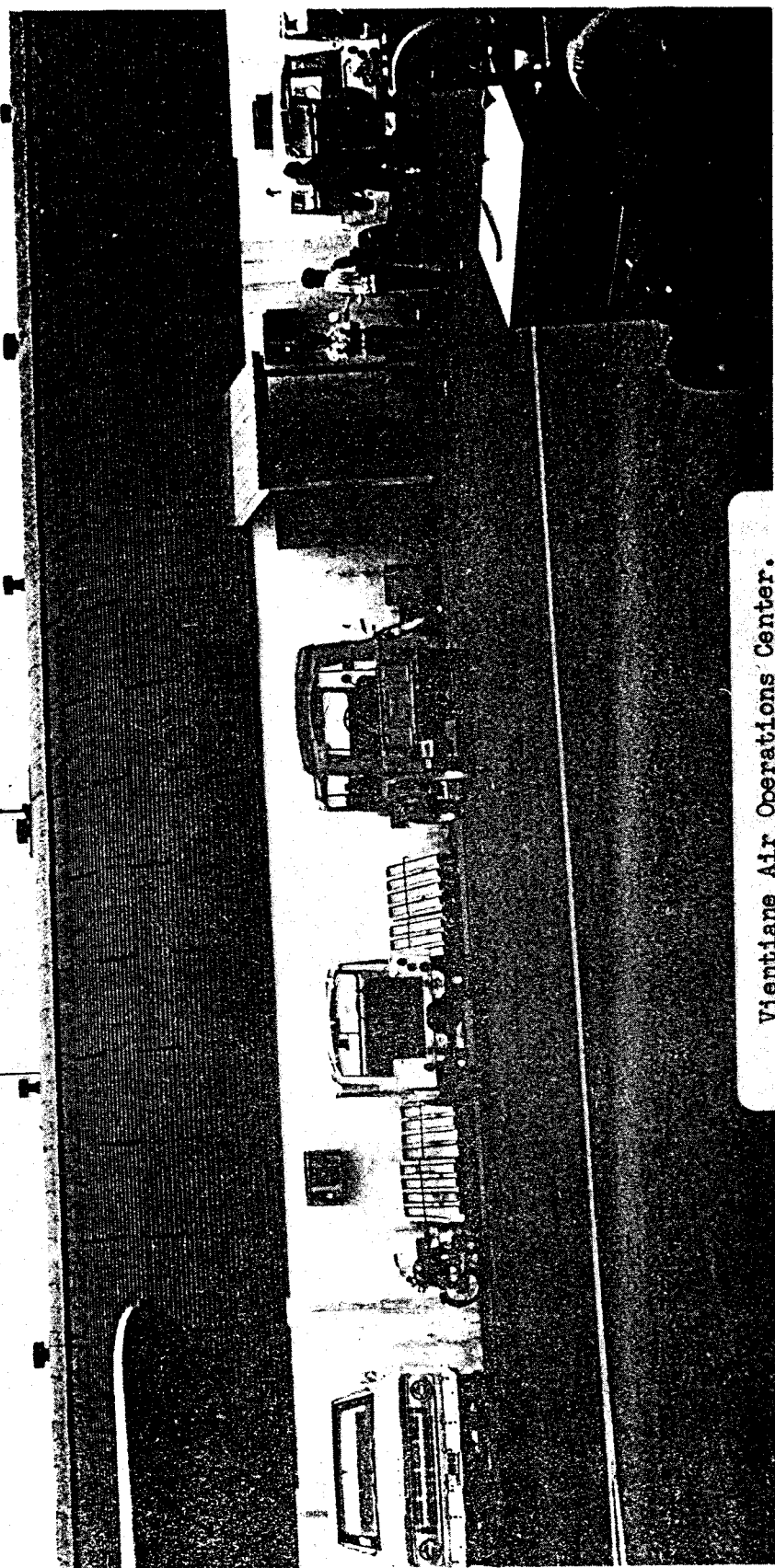
### Combat Operations

The first ten Thai pilots were given accelerated training at Udorn, but they were not released for combat until 8 June. Training was also stepped up for the ten Lao pilots, of whom five were to be combat ready by 1 August, the balance by 1 September.<sup>10/</sup> In the meantime, some Air America pilots were hurriedly pressed into service to fly Combat Air Patrol (CAP) for Search and Rescue (SAR) efforts. Authorized to expend ordnance, the Air America pilots flew strikes against AAA sites during rescue attempts.<sup>11/</sup> Neither the Lao nor Thai pilots were considered proficient enough for these operations. According to the Air Attache:<sup>12/</sup>

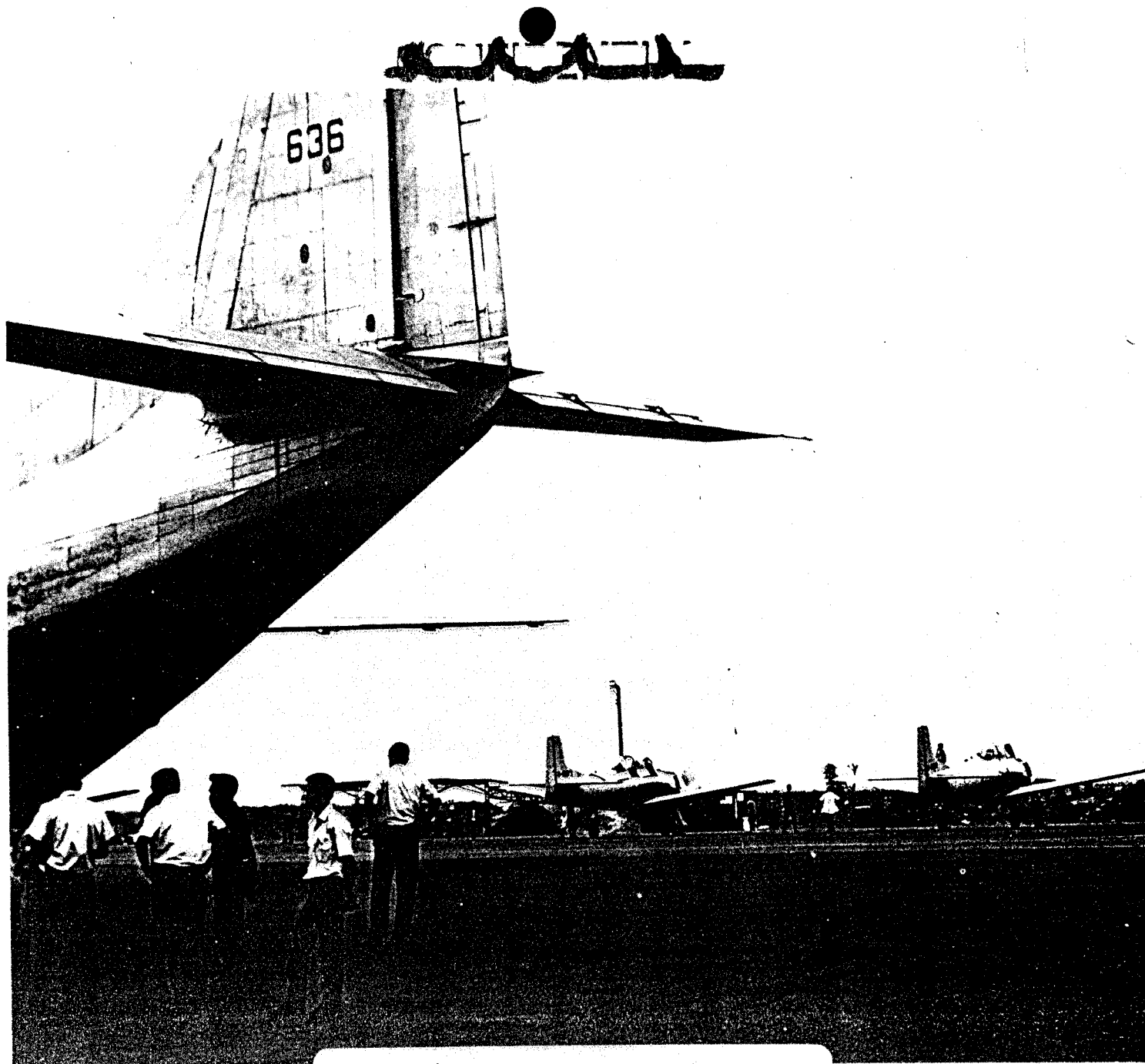
*"Air America started flying the T-28s after the Navy pilot was shot down [Lt. Charles Klussman, captured and later escaped, flying an RF-8 6 June 64]. The Thais were flying CAP for the Air America choppers, but on one occasion they got lost because they didn't know the area, and even though the pilots were seen on the ground, the choppers couldn't get them out because of ground fire. After that, the Air America pilots flew SAR escort only in T-28s. There was a program worked up where Air America pilots would come down to Udorn once a week to fly and stay current--then, when they were needed, they'd launch. The Ambassador also authorized WATERPUMP IPs to fly these missions. The program, like the use of napalm, needed Department of State approval."*

In mid-1964, air support for the Royal Lao Government consisted of the following: Thai pilots would take off from Udorn in the morning,





Vientiane Air Operations Center.  
FIGURE 6



RLAF T-28s at Vientiane return from an  
airstrike. C-123 (left) is Air America  
Shuttle.

FIGURE 7

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fly to Vientiane, refuel, arm, and fly strike missions, then return to Udon in the evening. [Air America] pilots flew CAP missions for SAR efforts, as did some USAF IPs (the [Air America] pilots stopped flying T-28s in 1967).<sup>13/</sup> The Lao aircrews flew from Vientiane against targets in the PDJ. And on 9 June 1964, the first F-100 strikes were made against Xieng Kouangville AAA positions, initiating the use of USAF aircraft in support of the effort to contain the Pathet Lao.<sup>14/</sup> This truly international air force was under operational control of the U.S. Ambassador, through the Air Attache, in Vientiane.

The appearance of the T-28s was a great surprise to the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese forces. The first concerted ground and air offensive, Operation TRIANGLE, began on 4 June 1964, with the object of eliminating a potentially dangerous pocket of enemy from the area near Sala Phou Khoun at the junction of Routes 7 and 13.

The Air Attache commented on that operation:<sup>15/</sup>

*"After Operation TRIANGLE, the ground commanders liked air support very much. So did Ambassador [Leonard] Unger and the others. When the first airstrikes were made, targets were not camouflaged and were easy to hit. TRIANGLE had a three column attack, each one led by a ground Forward Air Guide (FAG) from WATERPUMP.... Operation TRIANGLE was the only one actually planned and conducted by the General Staff. The others were by the individual military region commanders.... Unger agreed that it was the appearance of the T-28s that stopped the enemy advance and saved Muong Soui. The enemy did not expect air support."*

The July 1964 sortie and ordnance figures showed the abrupt rise.

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In April 1964, RLAF T-28s had flown 31 times; in July, 341 sorties were accomplished delivering the following ordnance: <sup>16/</sup>

Bomb-500 lbs.....	323
Bomb-200 lbs.....	327
Bomb-100 lbs.....	109
Rocket, 2.75.....	737 rds.
.50 Cal. ammo.....	21,950 rds.

With variations in RLAF targets, on 11 June, an air attack on the town of Khang Khay damaged the Communist Chinese "Cultural Center," killing one Chinese and wounding five others. When a New York Times article identified some of the pilots as being Thai, the U.S. Government denied all allegations. <sup>17/</sup> Other targets included the Ban Ken Bridge on eastern Route 7, but the three missions flown against it in July were unsuccessful, and one T-28 was lost. Because of this and other examples of the inability of T-28s to effectively bomb heavily defended areas, USAF air would be called upon more and more frequently, and the T-28s would soon revert to the role of close air support. <sup>18/</sup>

At the beginning of September 1964, the state of the RLAF was this: there were 15 T-28 qualified Lao pilots, with four others scheduled to complete training on 15 September. Four more were in CONUS training, to become graduates in August 1965. Thai pilots numbered 16, with another 9 to be ready by mid-October. <sup>19/</sup> This pool of 20 combat-ready Thais would be maintained until mid-1970, when the program was phased out. <sup>20/</sup> By late December 1964, there were 40 T-28s and 19 Lao pilots available for training and combat. <sup>21/</sup>

In October 1964, with the annual wet season eroding the Pathet Lao supply routes, ground action was extremely light. In conjunction with the increasing USAF participation in the air war, plans were made for RLAF T-28 strikes on a variety of targets, in some cases jointly with USAF bombing, at other times using USAF air only for CAP.

Strikes were planned to start on 14 October for eight days, with RLAF T-28s flying two missions per day. There were 22 specific targets, mainly military barracks and installations, but including Mu Gia Pass as well. Many of the targets were in the Laotian panhandle along the North Vietnamese supply routes to South Vietnam. The first missions against these targets were flown on 15 October, and after delays because of holidays and divers, the program was completed by 27 October 1964. Although initial results were encouraging, final analysis showed overall results to be below expectations. Security, said the Air Attache, had apparently been compromised, and the enemy had even begun to dismantle some of the fortifications.<sup>22/</sup>

#### Operations from Savannakhet

In November 1964, when General Ma moved his aircraft back to Savannakhet from Vientiane, a pattern for RLAF operations began to emerge. The Thai pilots, staging first out of Vientiane, then later from Luang Prabang,<sup>23/</sup> began to operate almost exclusively in Military Regions I, II, and V, while the Lao, flying from Savannakhet, supported ground operations in the two southernmost Military Regions III and IV.<sup>24/</sup> As one RLAF pilot would say much later, "We always flew separately. No,

the Thais, Americans, and Lao never flew together." <sup>25/</sup> Ironically, General Ma's return to Savannakhet may have saved half the aircraft possessed by the RLAF, for on 24 January 1965, guns of a T-28 accidentally triggered at Vientiane caused the destruction of eight parked and fueled fighters.

With General Ma in Savannakhet, newly inspired FAR commanders were planning extensive ground operations for the coming dry season with their new weapon, close air support. It appeared that 1965 was going to be a good year for the RLG. As the Air Attache said, "Prior to May 1964, any government operations were a fiasco. The RLG troops were always afraid of the NVA. Phoumi knew this, and would say that they would always run away." After the T-28s arrived, the Attache continued, the MR III Commander "ginned up a plan to go all the way to Tchepone but we managed to hold him back." <sup>26/</sup>

Plans were being made for a further increase in RLAF capabilities to support a rate of 40 sorties per day. General Ma, asking for three more O-1s, intended to revitalize the Savannakhet training program in June, and the FY 65 total of 151 RLAF officers and enlisted men to enter third country training (including 14 officers and 24 airmen to CONUS) was the highest number yet. <sup>27/</sup> The runway at Savannakhet was being renovated, and already there were plans for more extended operations and construction at Luang Prabang and Pakse.

RLAF sortie rates for the first half of 1965 showed little increase



RLAF General Staff - 1964 (left to right): front row, Col. Boukeo, Lt. Col. Ouneua, Lt. Col. Kougsana, Sounthone; second row, Brig. Gen. Ma, Col. Oudone<sup>+</sup>; third row, Maj. Sika, Lt. Col. Boun Phou, Lt. Col. Somlith, Lt. Col. Thongdy<sup>\*</sup>; fourth row, Capt. Ross Vilay, Maj. Concy.<sup>\*</sup> \* Active in RLAF, 1970; + Transferred to FAR.

FIGURE 8

[REDACTED]

from those during the last half of 1964,\* and there were problems in getting replacement aircraft for the ones destroyed at Vientiane. Not until August did the inventory of T-28s exceed the December 1964 number of 40, and attrition had further reduced the number by the end of the year to 35.<sup>28/</sup>

Along with plans for expansion came the first indication of what would become serious problems in the area of supply and support. A Requirements Office memo records proceedings at a Deputy Chief meeting of 28 December 1964 as follows:<sup>29/</sup>

*"...Much elaboration on sorties. What it amounts to is that with 40 assigned aircraft, a maximum of 40 sorties per day is the target. But no one was optimistic that this would be achieved, considering all factors."*

One of the factors was maintenance. WATERPUMP was "concerned about the fact that the burden of maintenance for Savannakhet could be a problem if RLAF relied too heavily on Det 6 [WATERPUMP]. But all were of the opinion that RLAF would continue to do maintenance except for the problem jobs."<sup>30/</sup> RLAF C-47 maintenance at Savannakhet and Vientiane

\* RLAF sortie figures before 1969 are contradictory. Some totals include Thai sorties; others do not, and one set of reports apparently does not distinguish between missions and sorties. For example, January 1965 RLAF sorties are cited as follows: 675 ("Effects of Air Operations, SEA," 2d Ed, 24 May 65); 337 (RO/USAID Records for Jan 65); 645 (DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI Hist, May 66). For February, the same three publications list 301, 229, and 413, respectively. Accordingly, extreme caution must be used when interpreting RLAF sortie trends.



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was progressing satisfactorily, but maintaining the T-28s soon proved to be too large a problem for the inexperienced Lao mechanics to cope with. An AOC Commander later said: <sup>31/</sup>

*"One of their big problems is a basic lack of mechanical aptitude. They don't understand primary flight or electrical problems. To them, it's Buddha, not an airfoil surface, that makes the airplane fly. We can convince them that it's the engine which makes the airplane fly and that when the engine stops, so does the airplane, but that's about all."*

A former Deputy Chief further delineated the problem: <sup>32/</sup>

*"Effective training is nonexistent in Laos. This comes about because of local lack of talent or desire to train; plus a knowledge that other arrangements will be made for training by in-country U.S. representatives, or by other governmental agencies or governments represented in Laos. In fact, Laotians do not really believe training is necessary to military success! Furthermore, illiteracy is high. A large percentage of soldiers who participate in third country [Army] training cannot read or write."*

Faced with the need to maintain the newly augmented T-28 fleet to support the planned RLG operations, U.S. advisers, who were assigned to Savannakhet in early 1965, began to do most of the T-28 minor maintenance themselves, a habit which was to extend well into the future. All major maintenance continued to be done at Udorn either by WATERPUMP or Air America.

Supply became another problem. At Savannakhet, the personality of General Ma began to intrude in what had appeared to be a slowly improving program at the main RLAF supply depot: <sup>33/</sup>

*"The Lao, in general, do not like written requests, nor do they understand or accept the necessary time delays between request and receipt. Controlled stockpiling is neither appreciated nor understood by the Lao personnel outside of supply. The prevalent situation is: an item is not considered until needed, if supply does not have it, then send a C-47 to Udorn. In fact, they sometimes send a plane to Udorn without checking supply. General Ma becomes very impatient with supply and is quick to criticize Americans when something is not immediately available because it was not programmed. He cannot seem to understand programming and allocation. He reacts like he feels no matter what he wants, the Americans can provide if they want. He considers failures to produce parts or supplies as a personal affront. Therefore, efforts to explain supply processes often meet with emotional outbursts. The end result is lack of good working relations between supply and General Ma's inner circles."*

Noting this situation, the Air Attache commented: "Ma did understand the need for good supply availability. While he was in charge, they never stole even a damn spark plug."<sup>34/</sup>

Despite the growing problems with supply, maintenance, and the personality of General Ma, the RLAF did provide close air support to the three major RLG "limited" offensives (as they were called), in 1965. [It is difficult, however, to differentiate between operations supported by Thai pilots and those of the RLAF.] The three July offensives began near Sam Neua, around Attapeu, and north from Dong Hene. Each of these operations was individually planned by the Military Region Commanders: in MR II, the Meo General Vang Pao; in MR III, the FAR General La; and in MR IV, the FAR General Phasouk. Getting air support was "very inconvenient," said one RLAF officer. "The MR Commander had to call Ma directly for

aircraft, and if Ma didn't like him at the time, he wouldn't send air support. Either that, or it took three days through normal communications."<sup>35/</sup>

Use of the C-47 fleet was also affected by the personality of the fiery general:<sup>36/</sup>

*"The C-47 program needs organization and guidance.... The Lao do not know how to develop schedules and use the C-47 force effectively. Most aircraft dispatched are at the personal direction of General Ma. I am not certain, but it appears he must approve each flight from Savannakhet. General Ma does not seem particularly interested in the C-47 fleet as an effective organization. His primary interest in the fleet seems to be to keep it out of the control of others. He often favors T-28 personnel at the expense of the C-47 group. This irritates and creates morale problems, and most seriously, it is creating a faction within the RLAF which appears to be gaining strength."*

Despite the published elation by U.S. and RLG personnel at the effects of the T-28s, regular USAF close air support for RLG forces was called upon for the first time in July 1965. The F-105s from Korat and Takhli and F-4s from Ubon flew from a strip alert posture under the respective code words of WHIPLASH and BANGO. In August, for instance, they flew 120 sorties under the control of U.S. pilots who called themselves RLAF Forward Air Controllers.<sup>37/</sup> An AIRA augmentee described a typical mission:<sup>38/</sup>

*"We would fly in a U-6. I was nonrated, and there was often a Meo who spoke Lao and a Thai who spoke both Lao and English in the back seat. On the ground*

[REDACTED]      [REDACTED]

*was a Meo and sometimes an American, who would point out the target to his Meo who then would radio the Meo in my back seat. He, in turn, would tell the Thai who would tell me. I'd call the fighters. Because we could not use marking rockets then, the first bombs were often the only method for marking the target. If the fighters hit the wrong valley, we had to start the whole process all over again."*

As the USAF increased the number of airstrikes in Laos, both for interdiction and for close air support, observers credited airpower with preventing the expected enemy spring offensive from materializing. In the fall of 1964 and the spring of 1965, Communist truck traffic had been heavier than ever before, but by September there was still no evidence of a concerted drive by PL/NVN forces in any of the Military Regions. With RLG forces still pushing forward, optimism prevailed. Gen. Vang Pao, for instance, was "elated" with the T-28s. According to one report, "In his region, RLAF strikes killed Communist troops in trenches hidden by as much as three meters of earth." On 6 August, 24 RLAF sorties supporting Vang Pao's Sam Neua offensive were credited with 170-190 enemy killed by air. In the same area, enemy troops abandoned almost completely any attempts to move or resupply during the daytime, and for a while even resorted to ~~air~~<sup>39/</sup> drops in the Sam Neua area. By the beginning of the dry season in November 1965, RLG forces were in extremely favorable positions in all Military Regions.

#### General Staff Troubles

General Ma's own position, however, had noticeably worsened. In February 1965, General Phoumi's final unsuccessful coup attempt had caused

his exile to Bangkok. Once again, Ma did not join the uprising. Actually, according to the Air Attache, what Ma had wanted to do was to fly to Udon until the whole matter settled down. When Phoumi told him about the coup, General Ma refused to go along, thus denying his close friend the air support he so definitely could have used. The Attache continued: <sup>40/</sup>

*"Afterward, Ma was called to Vientiane, and Kouprasith gave him the word about who was running the show. He wanted Ma to have nothing to do with the transports, just to handle the T-28s. Ma said no, that he was the air force commander. That was the beginning of the end. From then on, Ma was afraid for his life."*

In July, coincident with the national assemble elections, Ma charged that members of the General Staff were circulating rumors that he himself was planning a coup. He said that he had been meeting with his closest friends, General Vang Pao and General Phasouk, to plan stepped up drives against the Communists, and he told the Ambassador that he feared General Kouprasith would use the rumors as evidence to move against him. "I have no intention of starting a coup," General Ma told the Ambassador, "but if attacked I will defend myself." <sup>41/</sup> That someone definitely wanted him out of the way became apparent to all on 5 July when a bomb purportedly meant for him demolished the car immediately in front of him. The Air Attache remembered that night: <sup>42/</sup>

*"At the last minute, Ma had decided to accept my invitation to a party. He had said that if he came to Vientiane that his life would be in danger. That night, Ma came up from Savannakhet. Two of his pilots and some nurses asked him to ride back to their house with them, and he said all right. He was planning to come back to my house. On his way back, they pulled up behind a jeep. There was an explosion as the jeep passed over a mine, or something, and it*

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*was apparently detonated just a bit too early. Other people were hurt, but Ma was all right. He took a roundabout way back to my house, and said he wanted to go right back to Savannakhet. I told him he was safe here, and convinced him to spend the night. He left the next morning."*

The problems between Ma and the General Staff seemed to have their roots in two areas: command and corruption (Chapter V). Operationally, Ma was a dynamic leader. Occasionally, he would personally direct ground troops from the air to move after he and his aircraft had made airstrikes in front of them, but his desire to model the RLAF after the independent USAF caused great concern in Vientiane. Secondly, his penchant for honesty was directly opposed to the beliefs of many high ranking officials who saw aircraft as expeditious means of transporting illicit but highly profitable opium and gold. "The big problem," said the Air Attache, "was that everyone wanted to make money and Ma wouldn't let them." He continued: <sup>43/</sup>

*"He did not have much money himself and was known as 'the beggar general.' Everything he had went for his troops. Even though he was a complete patriot and honest, he would not refuse to borrow from others who were not so honest. Once he flew up to Long Tieng to borrow \$200.00 from Vang Pao, and when VP opened up his wallet to give it to him, Ma saw that VP had more. 'I need that too,' Ma said, reaching over and taking it all."*

By mid-1965, as a result of his quarrels with the General Staff, Ma had been stripped of his authority to promote enlisted men, and there had been no promotions in the RLAF for over a year. <sup>44/</sup> The air attaches --

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and General Ma's USAF advisers attempted to mediate throughout the year, but each apparent soothing of the waters was followed by more troubles. By the end of 1965, Ma had not only canceled at the last minute his planned trip to the United States using the excuse that there was "activity in South Laos,"<sup>45/</sup> but had virtually isolated himself in Savannakhet, ignoring all requests to come to Vientiane. The effect of these problems on his men, as an RLAF pilot testified, was significant:<sup>46/</sup>

*"It is uncertain whether General Kouprasith really did not like General Ma, but Ma used to say he did not. Ma just would not do what the General Staff said. Once he even refused to come to a party for the King, and he would never come to Vientiane. As with the King's party, he told me to tell the others that he was flying. He did fly too much, and he never cared for paper work or managing. He would never let anyone else do anything -- even at meetings. No one else could say a word. He began to get more and more unhappy, and the staff got more unhappy with him. He would make spot promotions if he liked you. Once he wanted to promote me, but I told him no, that I was too young. He sent me to France for fixed-wing IP school. All he cared about were his T-28s."*

One of the U.S. attaches agreed:<sup>47/</sup>

*"Since he is an insecure, moody person, he needs more than average assurances; thus, personal assurance from AIRA, visits by AIRA, etc., are very important....He also has no concept of organization because he distrusts so many people that he will not delegate authority or responsibility....He deals in personalities, not chains of command or problem areas."*

Thus, throughout 1965, the RLAF was, as the Attache had phrased it, "a disgruntled, factioned force with little true organization."<sup>48/</sup>

[REDACTED]

The pilots, however, still flew their missions--approximately 5,000 sorties in all, of which more than 50 percent were accomplished by the Thais.<sup>49/</sup> Having lost between 20 and 25 aircraft to combat and accidents, the RLAF in December actually possessed five fewer T-28s than there had been a year before. Then, as 1965 closed, the NVN/PL launched the largest offensive they had yet attempted in Military Region II.

#### Downfall of General Ma - 1966

With all the pressures upon General Ma, it is remarkable that he managed to maintain his sanity. Indeed, there were to be serious questions raised during 1966 as to his mental state, and an attempt to get him to Clark AB, Philippines, for a complete physical examination was unsuccessful. Nevertheless, plans and suggestions were made for further expansion of RLAF capabilities. Although hopes to convert the RLAF to A-1Es were abandoned because of "financial considerations," according to the Air Attache,<sup>50/</sup> there was a concerted effort made to establish an RLAF FAC program at Savannakhet. In March 1966, AIRA wired CINCPAC that a FAC capability was "precisely what is needed in a war such as we have here. Once these pilots are trained, they should be of great value to the Lao interdiction program and close support with their ground units." AIRA continued: "We are striving to develop, albeit the going is slow, as self-sufficient a little air force here as their capabilities will permit." Regular FAR officers had for two months been flying as back seat observers with USAF Cricket FACs from Nakhon Phanom, and of the 27 RLAF pilot training students then at Savannakhet, 17 could be made



[REDACTED]

available for O-1 FAC training.<sup>51/</sup> During the next few months, training sites in Thailand were investigated, and the plan seemed well on its way to fruition, but politics and the immediate military situation intervened.

What had been a promising trend toward unity with the merger of the FAR and neutralist FAN troops under a unified command was disrupted by mutiny, when in late March a battalion of Neutralist soldiers deserted their posts near Muong Suoi and returned to Vang Vieng. Except for General Vang Pao's Meo guerrillas, the Neutralists were the only RLG troops in and around the Plaine des Jarres. FAN General Kong Le, who six years earlier had staged his brief coup, had lost control of his forces and would be ousted in October. At the same time, according to one report, NVN/PL ground forces had been making steady gains in MR II, and "it was obvious that the initiative had been taken completely away from Government forces."<sup>52/</sup> Despite evidence that the enemy had suffered heavy casualties from airstrikes, the infiltration and supply routes remained open, and reinforcements arrived without undue delay. From April to June, 1966, for example, the RLAF accomplished the following:<sup>53/</sup>

*"...170 enemy troops killed and more than 10 wounded; four 37-mm antiaircraft guns damaged or destroyed; one ammunition depot destroyed; one fuel area destroyed; one rice storage area destroyed; four 82-mm recoilless rifles and two 60-mm mortars damaged, and many buildings destroyed."*

Nevertheless, enemy forces were making substantial gains in all areas. Even with the USAF BANGO/WHIPLASH close air support, RLG troops

[REDACTED]

could not hold against a determined and numerically superior enemy. As a result, on 18 April, what was called a "modest (32 sorties per day) air offensive" was launched by USAF aircraft in northern Laos, primarily by the 17 A-1Es recently transferred to Udorn from assets in Vietnam.<sup>54/</sup> RLAF sorties had taken quite a jump as well, averaging nearly 30 per day for the first three months of the year,<sup>55/</sup> and it was hoped that the increased air support would hold the enemy in check.

Three weeks later, however, General Ma's feud with Vientiane reached a turning point. That day, Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma informed the U.S. Ambassador that he had relieved Ma as Commander of the RLAF and had made him Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Intelligence.<sup>56/</sup> According to General Ma, no promotion was involved--he had been discharged.

Tense negotiations followed, with the Ambassador, the Air Attache, and the General Staff involved, exchanging arguments for and against retention of General Ma as Commander of the RLAF. There were reports of troops "maneuvering" around Savannakhet.

This resulted in the first of many subsequent attempts to reorganize the RLAF. Acceding to the U.S. Ambassador's request that the T-28s retain their "tactical flexibility," the General Staff nevertheless achieved the objective of consolidating transport and operational planning into a joint section of the FAR. In effect, the Generals had gotten their C-47s back. On the positive side, there was to be in principle, a joint or combined operations center concept established, with separate

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T-28 squadrons assigned to four bases (as facilities became available): Vientiane, Savannakhet, Luang Prabang, and Pakse. General Ma was to remain as Commander of the Tactical Air Command, but his headquarters was to be moved to Vientiane. General Sourith, former Commander of the FAR Aviation Branch, was to head the new Military Airlift Command. "This reorganization was," said the Ambassador, "the best course of action under the existing circumstances."<sup>57/</sup>

DEPCHIEF Assessment - 1966

As these events were taking place, DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI provided the first significant in-depth assessment of U.S. support and RLAF progress. The report was sharply critical. From March 1964 until April 1966, the following RLAF personnel had been trained:<sup>58/</sup>



1. CONUS

Officers - 63  
Enlisted Men - 111

2. Pilot, Mechanic, and Specialty Training by WATERPUMP

a. T-28

Pilots	Graduated	In Training
RLAF	36	10
RLAF	69	
Air America	20	
Mechanics		
RLAF	106	20

	Graduated	In Training
b. C-47		
Pilots		
RLAF	19	
Mechanics		
RLAF	60	
c. Specialty training		
Forward Air Guides	8	
RLAF Supply	11	
3. H-34 MTT		
Pilots	6	2
Mechanics	18	6

Expenditures for RLAF support, the DEPCHIEF stated, had increased from \$4,218,148 in FY 63 to \$21,776,000 in FY 65, not including USAID or CAS funding. The current (FY 66) program totaled \$38,113,496, money which also provided for 67 additional aircraft to be used for attrition and force strength increase. Also included were funds to construct a new AOC at Savannakhet to augment the one already completed at Wattay Airport, Vientiane. Noting the proposed reorganization of the RLAF, the DEPCHIEF agreed that the objective of building an effective air force within Laos was "feasible and has in fact progressed notably since June 1964." His conclusions, however, were grim:

<sup>59/</sup>  
*"The USA has provided over \$107 million of Military Aid (FY 65-66) to support Laos during the period of this report. Additional and comparable sums have been expended by USAID and CAS. The net return for these amounts of money, and other support activities, has been small and intangible. The in-country program controlled, of course, by the Embassy, Vientiane, seems directed toward no firm objective; and its success is measurable only by maintaining a tenuous, shaky, politico/military status in Laos. Few real political or*

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psychological gains can be found. The overall impression is of something just less than pouring money down a hole. Moreover, whatever terms of direction the USA policy objectives have employed are vague and ill-defined. Any directives guiding the application of tactical (or strategic) warfare in Laos today are virtually unrecognizable--and the period of our Laotian adventure will probably remain a thoroughly obfuscated affair; unprecedented and perhaps a buried classic of disorganized warfare. Unique in the annals of modern military history...Result: a costly war of attrition for the USA--one with no final objective defined....Friendly airpower has not been able to accomplish more than a partial hindrance to the Pathet Lao and Vietnamese in this remote and tangled area. I doubt it can ever do much more to increase its tactical influence in Laos under present rules of warfare."

Comparing the fluid military situation to the "Indian wars on our own Western frontier, circa 1830-1880," the DEPCHIEF noted unproductive training and problems with illiteracy, then commented more specifically on the state of the Lao military:

*"Effective leadership is virtually unknown at all levels. It appears to be a word that was never translated into Laotian.*

*"Command and control of units or operations is usually based on a semi-committee system, rather than upon a single commander of authority (or responsibility). Regional, familial, and personal circumstances often induce weak and unsatisfactory command arrangements.*

*"Logistics planning for a given operation is for the most part left to an Assistant Attache (adviser) and/or one of the few RO/USAID field representatives; of which there are far too few of both available to meet the need. Demands from FAR commanders are always heavy, usually amounting to a request to outfit his entire unit.*

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*"Supply training and discipline are missing factors.*

*"The introduction of extensive air support has fostered an attitude among Laos ground forces that firepower alone is sufficient to gain and control key terrain. A sad self-delusion which is not easily dispelled by the very few qualified U.S. advisers available.*

*"Coups, troop rebellions, and continuous general disagreement among many factors, including minor royalty, serve to weaken abilities and inhibit the formation of a strong central government or a sound political structure."*

Admitting that his conclusions presented a "drear picture," the DEPCHIEF predicted that only direct U.S. intervention, the reestablishment of a uniformed MAAG group, or a sizable increase of U.S. military personnel among the Lao would alleviate what he saw to be a steadily deteriorating situation. He strongly advocated immediate implementation of his third alternative, the further augmentation of clandestine U.S. personnel. Shortly afterward, Project 404 came into being.

The DEPCHIEF's resume also indicated an area of friction between his office in Bangkok and the various agencies within Laos who were working for similar goals:

61/

*"The complexity of the operation has increased proportionally, however, and much closer coordination among USAID, American Embassy, and Deputy Chief is going to be required in the future. Under present in-country visit restrictions, this office has been unable to obtain accurate information from the American Embassy and USAID regarding such items as maintenance requirements, flying hours, and notification of advance expenditures and training requirements."*

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### Exit General Ma

To the north, ironically, one of the few potentially effective commanders of "authority or responsibility," as the DEPCHIEF had said, was on his way out. General Ma, although he had officially agreed to the reorganization plans, sat seething in Savannakhet, refusing to make the move to Vientiane. As increased USAF air support, coupled with RLAF strikes, once again blunted the enemy offensive, and as General Vang Pao began another wet season counteroffensive of his own, General Ma reached the breaking point. His health had been worsening, and even though the FAR General Staff constantly reassured AIRA that Ma was in no danger, the General expressed more and more concern over the safety of himself and his family. Finally, on 21 October 66, Ma rebelled. Sending his Savannakhet T-28s to bomb FAR General Headquarters, General Kouprasith's home and headquarters, and the Wattay artillery site, Ma sent the following impassioned message to the U.S. Ambassador: <sup>62/</sup>

*"For the past several years, the Army has been driven to the edge of despair by the present armed forces high command. Those generals who sell everything from clothes to weapons have always managed to go on in their wrongdoing without being checked and punished. Those soldiers who desperately fight for the freedom of this country in which your government and the American people have pledged to support fail to get what you send physically. Corruption, indifference to the Army welfare, selfishness, oppressiveness, and cynicism have eaten away that wealth of pride in the soil of our officers and men. Unfortunately, the war won't end in a few years or months to come, as we all have hoped. The struggle will go on. Therefore, we still need to instill in the heart*

[REDACTED]

*of the Lao soldiers and people courage and unselfishness for their support of carrying on the fighting until the day our common cause will be achieved. If we chose to look on with appreciation, the awful act of moral killing performed every day by those so-called Grands Seigneurs of Vientiane, then we must admit that we chose to lose the battle against our enemy. We cannot tolerate and let those generals continue to betray the interests of the armed forces, thus the nation you pledge to help. We must stop them and we do it today. A change in the high command for the decency and truth will greatly improve the efficiency of the army, as it would be the first great thing to happen in the life of our soldiers. There was so much blood and sacrifice being lost in the battlefield to forget and forgive easily, for we want all to benefit if peace will come one day. We ask your help."*

From Vientiane, the official U.S. position toward General Ma's attempt was "hands off". To demonstrate its noninvolvement, USAF canceled all strikes in Laos for that day.<sup>63/</sup> No U.S. personnel had advance knowledge of or participated in the affair.

When it was all over, 19 FAR soldiers had been killed, 50 wounded; but none of the General Staff were hurt. Civilian casualties numbered 4 killed and 15 wounded.<sup>64/</sup> Significant damage had been inflicted upon the intended targets. The U.S. AIRA, Vientiane said:<sup>65/</sup>

*"Attack commenced from approximately 5000 feet, all high angle dives. Pilots displayed a high degree of professionalism. General Sourith, designated RLAF Commander, stated artillery compound totally destroyed, Kouprasith's home leveled, FAR Hq heavily damaged. General Sourith said, quote, Foolhardy event, but a good example of what the little planes can do, unquote."*



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When hoped-for support did not materialize and FAR troops began moving toward Savannakhet the next day, General Ma took 11 pilots and aircraft with him to Thailand where he sought, and after a lengthy session in court, achieved political asylum.

Although a former Air Attache (and a close personal friend of Ma) believed the General did not really want the bombing of Vientiane to happen and that he had tried to intercede with Colonel Bounlouth, his co-conspirator, at the last minute,<sup>66/</sup> the execution of the T-28 strikes and the subsequent defections were the most severe setbacks the RLAF had ever experienced. The U.S. Ambassador to Laos said:<sup>67/</sup>

*"Our next immediate task here is to reconstitute the Air Force. Happily, our strategy succeeded in preserving all our T-28s from damage and safely in either U.S., Thai, or Lao hands. We will have no problem reassembling them into a strike force. We have at least 28 and perhaps more than 30 qualified T-28 pilots. The only thing we will lack will be the fighting spirit that Ma certainly had. Sourith is no tiger and showed definite traces of a yellow streak in yesterday's events. But, since he's the best we have to work with, we'll start over again with him first thing Monday morning."*

[REDACTED]

CHAPTER III  
IN SEARCH OF ORDER--1967-1968

As the Royal Laotian Air Force entered its fourth phase, that of a slow progression toward organization and increased effectiveness, there were CAS reports that the enemy was continuing a buildup in the Sam Neua area and could soon make thrusts toward friendly positions.<sup>1/</sup> Despite the loss of its leader, the RLAF would now be needed more than ever. To some of the pilots who had remained at their duty stations, General Ma's departure left a "feeling of disorder".<sup>2/</sup> To an assistant air attache, it appeared that "the best pilots in the RLAF had left with him".<sup>3/</sup> Said an AOC Commander, "There was a complete breakdown".<sup>4/</sup> Nevertheless, on 10 November, combat flying was resumed, and during the remainder of the month, the T-28s flew 639 sorties.<sup>5/</sup>

Hiatus - 1967

For the next 13 months, the total RLAF sorties were to show a slight decline from those of the previous year, as aircraft losses hit a new high from both ground attacks and combat. During 1967, implementation of the promised military reorganization would run into delay after delay, creating severe morale problems within the RLAF and nearly causing a rebellion by some of the younger colonels. Even though more T-28s would be provided, new operational concepts would be used, and RLAF training by USAF instructors would be expanded, 1967 would be a static year for the RLAF. The young pilots continued to fly sorties as instructed,

[REDACTED]

while the politicians and General Staff quietly vied with each other for control of this most important military and political asset. Everyone agreed, however, that with the exile of General Ma, General Kouprasith's power was more secure than ever. According to his brother, Lt. Colonel Kouprasong, then Laotian Air Attache to Washington, General Sourith was a "weak officer who would fully support General Kouprasith."<sup>6/</sup> A few days later, Lt. Colonel Kouprasong assured USAF representatives of undivided FAR support for the RLAF, provided United States assistance and advice were maintained.<sup>7/</sup>

The new RLAF Commander began his tenure with an inspection trip. During the week of 6 November, General Sourith visited installations at Savannakhet, Pakse, and Seno. Meeting with local RLAF personnel, General Sourith stressed the point that he first intended to develop discipline, organization, and leadership. After three or four years, he stated, he would propose a separate air arm. Expressing concern over the haphazard methods of ordnance storage and handling, General Sourith said that he would also like to establish an Air Academy at Seno in the future. According to the Assistant Attache who accompanied him:<sup>8/</sup>

*"All in all he displayed a sincere interest of the basic problems at hand, was well received, and bolstered a sagging morale. Needless to say, the RLAF did its best to 'put on a good show for the inspection'."*

Although it would be a while before the Savannakhet squadron would again achieve full scale operations, the Thais and the RLAF pilots newly

[REDACTED] [REDACTED]

assigned to Luang Prabang resumed their mission schedule in Northwest Laos as if nothing had happened. Strikes on 13 and 14 November killed at least 14 enemy soldiers and wounded five others, most of whom were identified as North Vietnamese.<sup>9/</sup> Additionally, plans were discussed for a Combat Operations Center in Vientiane, but a report in late November that "with representatives from the FAR...RO, USAID, AIRA, and ARMA, the COC has proved extremely valuable in coordinating military operations"<sup>10/</sup> was prematurely optimistic. This initial COC concerned itself only with some operations in northern Laos; it would be more than three years before a potentially useful country-wide COC would be in existence. Still, there was at least thought being given to a unified command structure.

With increased numbers of USAF airstrikes, especially against the supply routes along Route 7 and north to Sam Neua, a full scale dry season enemy offensive did not materialize.<sup>11/</sup> Instead, the NVN/PL began to resort to attacks against government outposts which were strategically vital not only to the RLG but also to the USAF. Supporting the bombing effort in North Vietnam, many of the forward Lima sites had weather reporting stations, navigational aids, and facilities for USAF rescue helicopters. On 6 January, a concerted attack in northeast Laos against Site 36 was beaten off by USAF jets and Thai-piloted T-28s, and the important site held.<sup>12/</sup> To the west, however, the new RLAF squadron at Luang Prabang was not as fortunate. On 2 February, what was called

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a "disastrously successful" 15-minute rocket and small arms sneak attack caused the destruction of six parked T-28s and two H-34 helicopters. Three other T-28s and one H-34 were damaged. The new AOC was partially destroyed, and five friendly troops were killed. No enemy casualties were reported. A month later, on 4 April, Site 52 north of Sam Neua was overrun with relative ease.<sup>13/</sup> Apparently, the increased availability of airpower had caused the enemy to develop tactics of small-scale, nibbling operations which would, as the years progressed, slowly eliminate more and more RLG strongholds in remote areas.

The attack on the Luang Prabang airfield marked a sorrowful first for the RLAF and pointed out the necessity for increased base security, a task which was the responsibility of the regular FAR troops, not the RLAF. Luang Prabang was now the third base with a functioning AOC, and its strategic location permitted increased T-28 operations in all of northwestern Laos. "Our primary job," said a USAF AOC commander, "was the defense of Luang Prabang and Nam Bac," the latter being the last major RLG stronghold outside of the royal capital itself. By June, a total of six Americans were assigned at Luang Prabang.<sup>14/</sup>

From December 1966 to May 1967, T-28 sorties averaged 736 per month, with a low of 544 in April and a high of 842 in December and May. "This period," said the DEPCHIEF, "proceeded much more smoothly, politically speaking, than did the previous six months."<sup>15/</sup> By 17 July, the DEPCHIEF could report to CINCPAC as follows:<sup>16/</sup>

[REDACTED]

*"The Royal Lao Air Force has remained relatively stable during this period. The T-28 sorties for this year have averaged slightly more than 400 per month for the RLAF and about 250 per month for the Thai pilots flying T-28 missions in Laos. The more favorable RLAF sortie rate is primarily attributable to an increase in pilots and available aircraft."*

Unfortunately, the DEPCHIEF had not yet received word of the second and more destructive attack which had occurred the night before against the T-28s at Luang Prabang. On 16 July, a sapper team penetrated the perimeter defenses and successfully placed satchel charges on aircraft readied for the following day's mission. Nine more T-28s and one UH-34 were destroyed. The DEPCHIEF said later: <sup>17/</sup>

*"The loss of such a large portion of the total T-28 resources seriously degraded the operational capability of the RLAF. Replacement aircraft for the Luang Prabang incident in February 1967 came primarily from the aircraft normally available for Thai (Firefly) sorties. The overall degradation was noted in the low sortie rate during February, March, and April 1967. By May 1967, replacement aircraft had been received to replace those destroyed, and the Luang Prabang sortie rates rose accordingly."*

As if problems with the enemy were not enough at Luang Prabang, a unique situation developed shortly after the sapper attack. A T-28 was declared Not Operationally Ready - Supply (NORS) by the RLAF crews because it ostensibly was possessed by evil spirits. Although the Lao pilots refused to fly the aircraft, permission was secured for a one-time flight to Udon where, under DEPCHIEF supervision, the aircraft was returned to a duty status: <sup>18/</sup>

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*"Here, Buddhist monks were able to exorcise the bad spirits. The cost was \$7.62 covering the cost of candles and herbs for the ceremony and Salem cigarettes, toothpaste, and soap for the monks. This was considered a small price to pay for the continued utilization of a \$181,000 aircraft."*

In mid-1967, the ground situation was relatively static, but once again there were ominous signs from the enemy. Reports circulated of an unprecedented buildup of NVN/PL forces in the Plaine des Jarres, and three new NVN battalions were said to be in the Nam Bac area. To the south, MR III and IV were unseasonably quiet as increased USAF airstrikes pounded the supply routes to South Vietnam. To counter expected enemy attacks, plans were formulated by the newly-created TAC North Command of the FAR for a joint air/ground operation against enemy reinforcements. From MR II, General Vang Pao began to move some troops toward Nam Bac to assist the FAR forces there. <sup>19/</sup>

#### Troubles Within The RLAF

The planned offensive never materialized, partly due to problems associated with the rainy season, but primarily because of growing disenchantment within the FAR and RLAF itself. The military reorganization, drafts, completed in January, were still being "considered" by the General Staff and the Prime Minister. Although the DEPCHIEF, from his position at Bangkok, Thailand, believed in August that the RLAF had "been reorganized into functional groupings that provide a better basis for management," his comment that "the greatest deficiency is leadership" indicated only the nature of the problem, not the extent. <sup>20/</sup> Actually, the RLAF as a whole was in very bad shape.

[REDACTED]

Morale throughout the RLAF was low, and there were reports that RLAF officers were often absent from duty for long periods of time. On 5 September, for instance, a combination of low pay and poor discipline triggered a refusal of some ground crews to load bombs. At Luang Prabang, short rounds from T-28s caused RLG forces to evacuate positions to the enemy.<sup>21/</sup> And because of what one RLAF pilot called the "unwieldy" apparatus of TAC North,<sup>22/</sup> there was a general lack of command and control in Northern Laos.

An outgrowth of the command problem was the "Opium War," an episode which involved all elements of the RLAF, including H-34s, C-47s, and T-28s. Jealous of their vested interests in the northwest Laos opium traffic, certain high-ranking members of the General Staff ordered the T-28s to bomb an unauthorized train of pack animals carrying opium across the Burmese Border. On 30 July, airstrikes were carried out, killing a sizable number of Haw tribesmen. Having been given instructions to watch the train closely, the T-28s executed airstrikes upon the order of an unidentified commander. Later, the Prime Minister would say publicly that he had authorized the attacks, but privately he admitted that he had not. Although the immediate U.S. reaction was to exert financial pressure to restrict and control RLAF operations, "with the menace to Nam Bac" becoming more apparent every day, the matter was dropped.<sup>23/</sup> The overall RLAF situation in August was summed up by an attache:<sup>24/</sup>

*"The troubles in the Air Force will not be eliminated by any simple formula; they are too basic."*



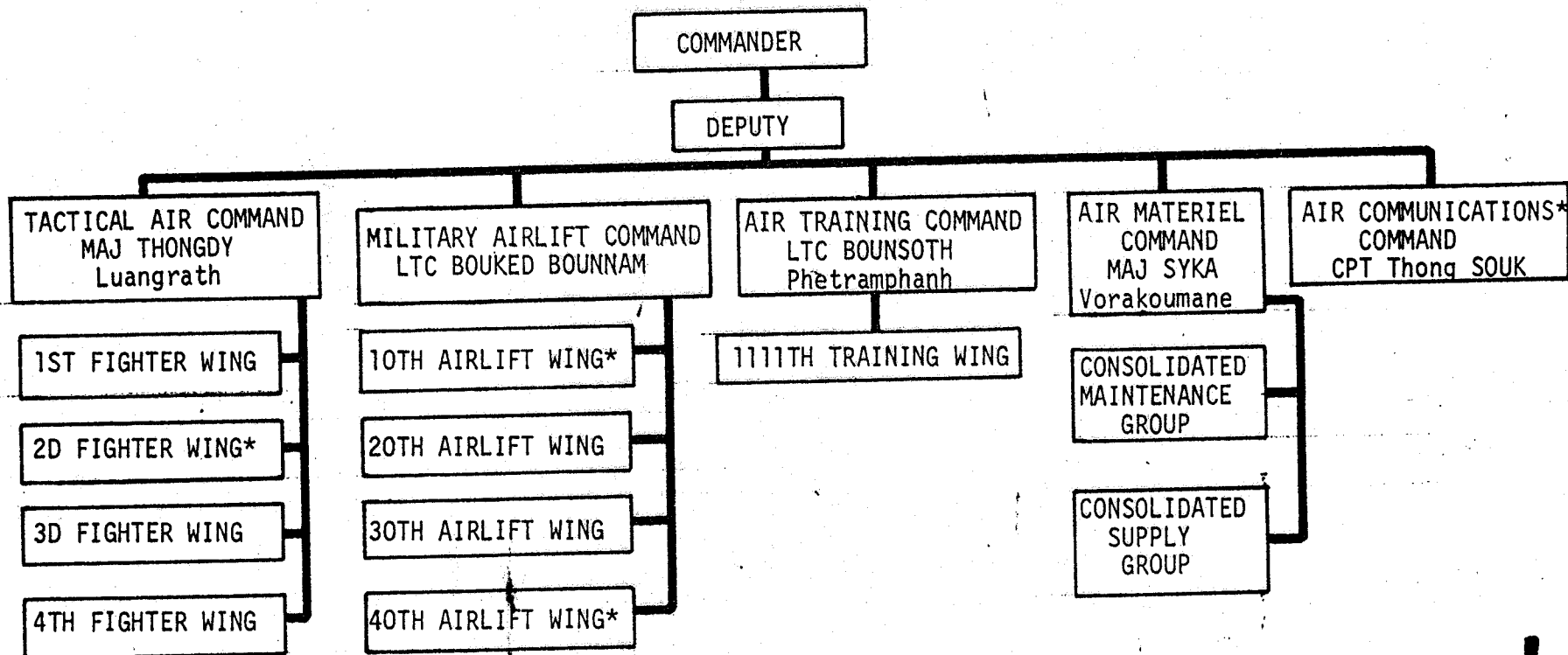
[REDACTED]

*The RLAF is divided into four basic groups which are mutually antagonistic: 1. The T-28 pilots who fight and die for their country; 2. the transport pilots who steal and traffic and make a great deal of money; 3. the base personnel which get next to nothing and resent it; 4. the General Staff...of the air force which merely jabbers and accomplishes nothing. Sourith has really not gotten hold of the problem and has not even begun to think of how to handle these four divergent forces and weld them into an organization which works. It will be a big step to get Oudone out to Savannakhet and to put Khongsana in as Chief of Staff, but Khongsana is really too mild to be able to control this beast. Sourith has certainly shown himself incapable of handling the RLAF."*

On 27 September, the RLG Cabinet finally agreed on the planned reorganization of the FAR, as a part of which the RLAF would be constituted as shown on Figure 5. In addition to those shown on the chart, there were two additional commands: a School Command and an Air Base Command. Promotion procedures were established, and the head of the RLAF was to be "a general officer, who is a flier, or if none is available...an Army general." To implement the new reorganization, a committee of senior officers was selected.<sup>25/</sup> At that point, with 1,286 personnel assigned on the rolls, a disparity in the officer corps was apparent:<sup>26/</sup>

*"The RLAF Commander has established a policy of filling his general staff positions with officers of field grade rank replacing many of the company grade officers previously in the positions. Country team members view this policy with apprehension. Junior officers are mostly CONUS-trained and familiar with MAP procedures. Senior officers are mostly French trained and not generally as knowledgeable....Generally, the outlook is for the RLAF to operate more autonomously than ever with practically no central control."*

## RLAF FUNCTIONAL COMMANDS



\* Not Activated.

Source: DOD IR 2 856 034267, 21 Sep 67

Figure 9

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Toward the end of November, a group of 57 FAR colonels presented a petition to the RLG calling for a complete governmental reorganization, including a plan to bypass the present CINC and Deputy CINC of the FAR. When the petition was rejected, there were rumors about a possible coup attempt, but none materialized.<sup>27/</sup> The military situation around Nam Bac was becoming too critical.

#### Fall of Nam Bac

At Luang Prabang, the TAC North command was faltering. Having deployed 12 battalions to Nam Bac in August, a move which an attache called "reckless" and "very tempting to the VC," the command staff was also exploiting the local populace for personal gain: "The cost of living is very high--and the profit goes to Tactique North."<sup>28/</sup> By December, there was almost no organization at all. According to the AOC Commander,<sup>29/</sup>

*"The planned joint operation involving Col. Bounchanh's forces [Group Mobile 15] and Gen. Vang Pao's forces has slipped slightly behind schedule but preparations are continuing. GM 15 should start to move from Nam Bac to Gen. Vang Pao's area today. Col. Bounchanh still apparently has no concrete plans for his part in the operation. I have continued [to try] to obtain specific information on what their airpower needs are and continue to receive no specific targeting information. Col. Bounchanh will only say he wants air support, but he refuses to get specific on what targets he wants hit, when he wants them hit, and how he intended to coordinate his ground movements with air support. I asked specifically if he wanted fighter cover in the area for the GM 15 movement, and was told 'No'."*

The next day, 880 troops were airlifted east to the Nam Ou River for their linkup with Vang Pao, but immediately afterward the enemy

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increased pressure on Nam Bac and mortared the 2,600-foot airstrip and the town's 3,800 FAR defenders.<sup>30/</sup>

During the attacks on Nam Bac, RLAF airstrikes from Luang Prabang were not without their moments of singular success, but the lack of coordination and control caused insurmountable problems. An RLAF staff officer described the targeting procedure this way:<sup>31/</sup>

*"A strike request would go from the battalion commander to Group Mobile (GM) to TAC North to Vientiane to RLAF Headquarters and then to the Luang Prabang or Vientiane AOC. The answer would then go back the other way."*

It is no wonder that when the situation deteriorated rapidly a few weeks later, AIRA wired the AOC Commander at Luang Prabang a desperate message:<sup>32/</sup>

*"General Sourith, General Oudone, and perhaps others are at Luang Prabang. If you can get to Sourith and Oudone, see if you can sell them on the following:*

- . Forget T-28 close support around Nam Bac itself, except when specific targets identified from the ground.*
- . Use T-28s in maximum effort east of Nam Bac, up Nam Ou, Route 19, on military structures and other targets as you can get them.*
- . You and your boys select the targets, not TAC North. Use CAS maximum.*
- . See if general will let you more or less take command, fly them when and as often as you want."*

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The week before Nam Bac fell, RLAF T-28s from Luang Prabang had delivered 63.7 tons of ordnance and fired 26,885 rounds of .50 caliber ammunition, but without proper targeting, could not stop the enemy. <sup>33/</sup> According to the AOC commander,

*"The feeling appears to be that airpower can work miracles in the battle of Nam Bac, and the T-28s are still not being properly targeted, due to lack of intelligence on part of FAR TAC North staff. The enemy is highly mobile and his movements are not known, but are estimated by TAC North. Targets being given are still area targets, and when pressed for definite targets, the coordinates given are usually based on outdated intelligence. The daily operations order from TAC North arrives at the AOC at approximately 1000 hours each day, and roughly translated from the French reads, 'All T-28 go Nam Bac, all day.' The T-28s report in to the Nam Bac CP and are given targets. Attempts to remedy the targeting problems have failed. The few times the O-1F has been utilized to check on suspected targets, the suspected targets proved valueless."*

Five hours after this message was sent on 13 January, all contact was lost with the Nam Bac command, and an area search by three H-34s, one U-17, two C-47s, and the AOC U-10 had failed to turn up any trace of the friendly troops. <sup>34/</sup> A four-battalion NVA/PL attack had routed the defenders, and of the nearly 4,000 FAR troops, only some 1,400 were to be accounted for by the end of January. Stragglers continued to turn up as late as April. In manpower and materiel, the loss of Nam Bac had been the costliest RLG defeat of the war. <sup>35/</sup> During the first two weeks of January, Luang Prabang T-28s had flown 100 sorties in defense of Nam Bac, and the Thais from Vientiane had added 25 more, to little avail. That

[REDACTED]

same month saw six T-28s destroyed and seven damaged, including a flight of three which simply disappeared on a strike mission, besides six major noncombat accidents.<sup>36/</sup>

During this first year without General Ma, the individual RLAF pilots, most of them warrant officers or lieutenants (by October, for instance, only one RLAF captain was flying T-28s in combat),<sup>-37/</sup> had frequently demonstrated extreme gallantry. On one occasion, in an operation near Nam Bac, an enemy mortar and a heavy machine gun were pinning down government troops. Not yet able to drop napalm, the Luang Prabang flight leader loaded empty napalm canisters with aviation gas and, using all nine aircraft, soaked down the hill. They then set the fuel on fire with white phosphorous rockets and .50 caliber tracers. "We couldn't confirm whether or not they got the guns," the AOC Commander said, "but the enemy didn't shoot from there for a long time."<sup>38/</sup> Despite this and other acts of professionalism and ingenuity, the RLAF as an effectively-operating military organization had not progressed at all.

#### Retrenchment and Attempts At Reform - 1968

With the fall of Nam Bac, the year had hardly started auspiciously, and, in terms of the ground situation, 1968 would prove even more disappointing. Important major sites would be lost, and all but one RLG "limited offensive" would produce unsatisfactory results. For the RLAF, however, 1968 was a significant year. Not only did sortie rates finally begin to climb toward the desired levels, but, with almost agonizing slowness,



Four RLAF liaison aircraft with U-4 on  
the right, a gift to King Savang Vathana  
from President Eisenhower.  
FIGURE 10

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

there were personnel shifts and command realignments which marked the first real movement yet toward a more efficiently functioning air force. With the completion of the new AOC at Pakse and activation of the first Lao T-28 squadron to be stationed permanently at Vientiane, the RLAF in 1968 once again began to expand its strength and capabilities.

Also during this year, the individual characteristics of the practically autonomous fighter squadrons (FS) began to emerge. At Luang Prabang, for instance, the role of the 1st FS was primarily defensive, assisting FAR troops in holding established positions. In MR II, T-28s from Vientiane, and later from Long Tieng, struck area targets and worked both on offense and defense with General Vang Pao's mobile guerrilla forces. Similarly in MR III, the 3d FS from Savannakhet worked with CAS-trained guerrilla battalions and FAR troops, but in MR IV the mode of operation was much like that of MR I--defensive support for relatively static RLG enclaves.<sup>39/</sup>

As the RLAF had increased in strength, so had the pressures for further reform and reorganization. In early January, a trend which had started with the departure of General Ma received more impetus:<sup>40/</sup>

*"The most significant trend within the RLAF is the one of decentralization of power and control brought about by the reorganization of 1 January 1968. The primary points of this reorganization are as follows: to abolish two major commands (Tactical Air Command and Air Transport Command), to give the Base Commanders more power (particularly in regard to flying operations), and in essence to establish composite squadrons at each of four operating bases. The reorganization*



[REDACTED]

may be viewed in one of the two following manners:  
(1) If an effective Commanding Officer is named Base Commander, better utilization of resources and a smoother operation may result; and (2) on the other hand, with no one officer in control of tactical or transport aircraft the RLAF may remain weak in the foreseeable future and still subordinate to FAR control."

The rationale behind decentralization was obvious to one RLAF officer:  
"After Ma left, we tried to divide the T-28s, so that there would not be one group. One group was too powerful."<sup>41/</sup> At Savannakhet in January, there were ten T-28s and 13 pilots who often staged out of Pakse until the AOC there was completed. At Luang Prabang, there was a squadron of equivalent size.<sup>42/</sup> The Thais continued to fly from Vientiane.

There were few problems with the attitude of the young T-28 pilots, but quite the opposite was the case with the older, higher ranking C-47 pilots and staff officers. Having had their families and their private interests established in one location since the beginnings of the RLAF, some of them were not going to move without a struggle. In addition, what AIRA had feared was about to happen at the two main bases, Vientiane and Savannakhet. As an attache noted, because "the FAR General Staff had a big hand" in directing the Base Commander assignments, two of the important selectees, as well as the RLAF Deputy Commander, were going to cause a great deal of trouble for General Sourith. By 22 January, only two of the reassigned officers had moved to their new positions, the Luang Prabang Base Commander (to be killed in action on 2 June) and the Chief of Intelligence. The Air Attache said:<sup>43/</sup>

[REDACTED]

*"As far as the other newly assigned officers are concerned...Perhaps some of them just have not moved because General Sourith had not reemphasized the need for them to move, or perhaps because no one has physically moved them. However, in the case of some of the others, it appears to be a fact that they just will not move. There are some indications that General Sourith may lose face, and perhaps lose more control of the Air Force, by not being able to see the reassignment of these officers completed."*

According to the RLAF Commander, the main reason why the officers refused to move was "that they were involved in corruption at their present locations." General Sourith further added that the newly appointed Savannakhet Base Commander, Lt. Colonel Outama, was also flying commercial aircraft out of Luang Prabang as a civilian. He had been authorized to do so, the General continued, by the Deputy Commander, Col. Oudone Manibod. Three men, he concluded: "Colonel Oudone, Lt. Colonel Outama, and Major Champeng must be kicked out of the Air Force." Even though he had gone to the CINC FAR with the statement that either these three or he himself had to go, nothing had happened. Commenting on this problem, an attache said: <sup>44/</sup>

*"Some of the conversation with General Sourith is quoted directly, even though it appears rather elementary, to show how little authority, control, and power he really exerts over RLAF personnel. Note that he uses the term 'ask' instead of tell or order. During the selection of some of these officers, as well as previous reassignments, the General gathers all his staff plus many other officers and they choose an officer for an assignment instead of his making the selection and issuing orders."*

[REDACTED]

Lack of command authority was not peculiar to General Sourith alone; however, it permeated the entire RLAF. An AOC Commander summed up the problem this way: "One thing the Lao won't do is...tell anyone to do something. They consider it bad manners."<sup>45/</sup> Eventually, the officers in question did assume their new positions, but in their roles as Base Commanders were to cause more problems, as General Sourith had indicated and as will be detailed later in this report.

#### Entrance of the Meo

At the same time that the staff officers were reluctantly changing jobs, a new and potentially disruptive element entered the RLAF. On 22 January, the first two Meo pilots were graduated from pilot training at Udorn.<sup>46/</sup> Looked down upon as savages by many lowland Lao, the Meo hill tribesmen of General Vang Pao had become a military necessity to the RLAF. Previously, however, no Meo had been trained as pilots. The primary reason had been that the RLAF pilots were all officers and possessed, by law, at least a high school education. None of the Meos had received this education. But when General Vang Pao indicated more and more frequently to his CAS advisers that he would like his own Meos to fly for him, CAS quietly selected certain Meo officers and provided flight training for them in Bangkok. By the time the Meo student pilots were assigned to WATERPUMP for T-28 training, they already possessed at least 150 hours of light plane flying time.<sup>47/</sup> An assistant attache recounted the circumstances of the first Meo pilots:<sup>48/</sup>

[REDACTED]

"Yes, I remember the first training of the Meos. Oh, how I remember. The Lao didn't want them, said they couldn't be trained as pilots and that they didn't have the necessary education. Some of them had been flying with CAS; I don't know in what capacity, but a couple of them had a lot of time. CAS started with three. They spoke English very well. I was reluctant to have them trained, because I knew they wouldn't really be integrated into the FAR. They'd end up working for Vang Pao, who paid them. I was afraid that first, the FAR wouldn't be able to control them; and second, they'd end up flying out of 20A, which is a bad place to fly T-28s from. Look at the accidents they've had.

"Nevertheless, CAS got the three Meo in training, and when two were graduated, they supposedly became officers in the RLAF with full status to be given them after one year... The Meo were damn good pilots, and they were sent to Luang Prabang for their first assignment. Shortly afterward, they came back down to Vientiane and said they wouldn't stay at Luang Prabang any more, that they wanted to fly out of Vientiane. One even said he wanted to fly with the Thais! Sourith began raising hell about the lack of control he had over them, and CAS stepped in. The first thing we knew there was a Meo contingent at Vientiane. Then there was the mid-air collision, I think with the three T-28s. They've never been found. One of the pilots was a Meo, and in one of the airplanes was the Chief of Staff of MR V. There was a very big flap. With CAS backing, Lt. Lee Lua got his own squadron (there were about six pilots, I think), and the whole thing was a mess. Lee Lua had no interest in the RLAF, as he was being paid directly by Vang Pao, who gave him a house in Vientiane and a radio, so the two of them could talk directly. He was completely, as far as the RLAF was concerned, out of control. A new AOC Commander at Vientiane helped get some semblance of order, but then we heard there were six more Meo coming who were not English speakers. Some of us resisted, the RLAF resisted, because we saw a Long Tieng AOC in the wind, and as I said, it's just not a good place to operate from. Lee Lua was already landing at 20A regularly, and the whole thing was just bad ----- news."

[REDACTED]

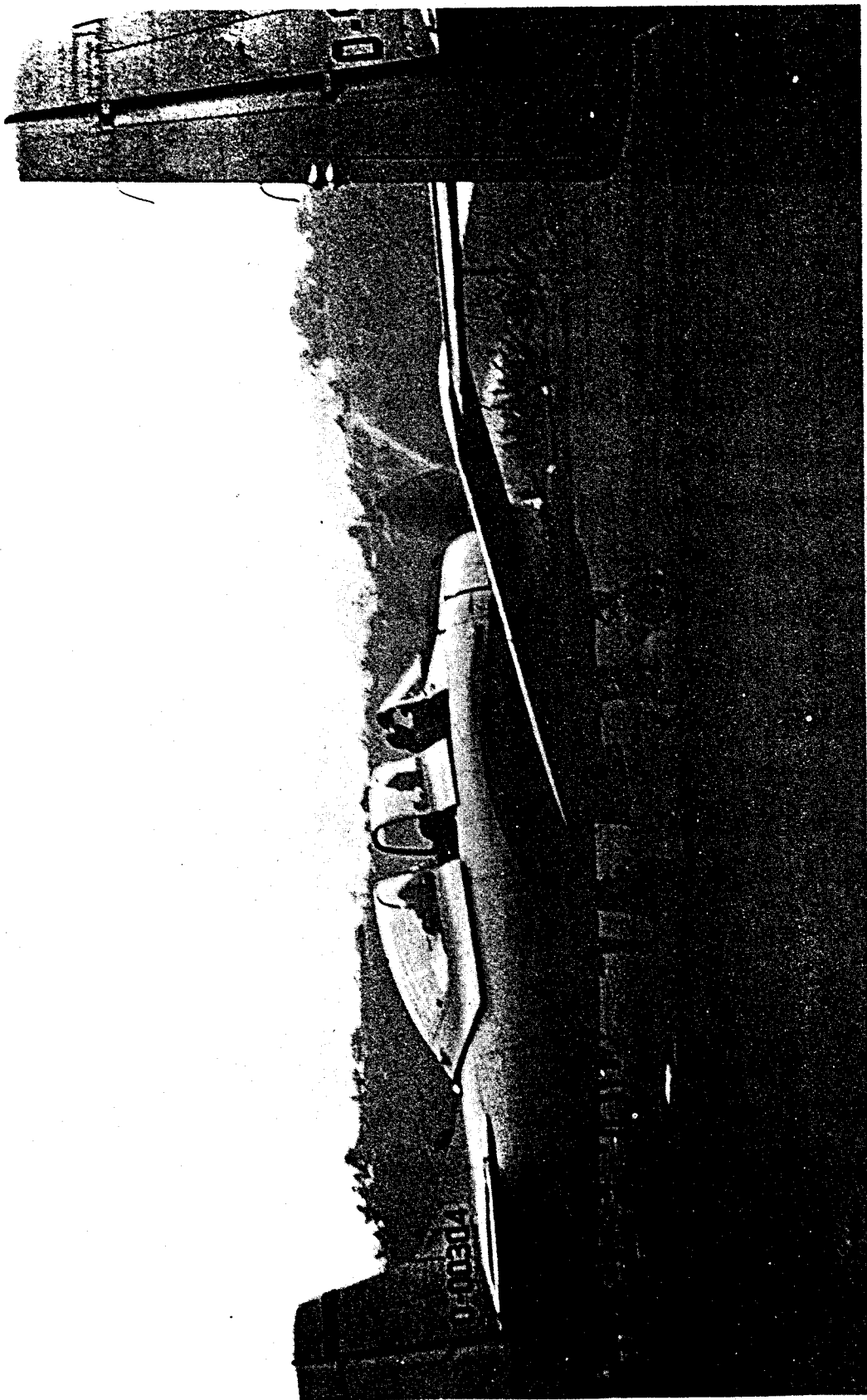
RLAF officers also had some reservations. A Squadron Commander said, "The Meo are paid more than we are, and they do not work for us. Personally, I like to fly with them--but you must understand that they are different from us."<sup>49/</sup> A staff officer agreed: "We hope the Meo can be taught the rules of safety and not [just] to fly, fly, fly, but it is General Vang Pao who controls them."<sup>50/</sup> In effect, what developed was that the charismatic MR II Commander soon possessed his own small air force within the RLAF, but by 1970 combat losses and aircraft accidents were to claim all but two of the eight Meos who had been trained.

With the Meo flying combat, a question of funding arose. "CAS runs Vang Pao," said the DEPCHIEF's Chief of Staff, "but these aircraft and the ordnance they deliver come from DOD assets. If they want their own air force, CAS should help pay for it."<sup>51/</sup>

While working for Vang Pao, the Meo pilots as well as the Lao who flew with them enjoyed some special privileges. According to a Long Tieng USAF advisor:<sup>52/</sup>

*"There was one Meo who is a captain when he's here with VP but is a sergeant in the regular Lao structure; Vang Pao promotes his own here, and he also gives the Lao pilots who fly something extra. I don't know about money, but he does give them presents, like motorcycles, etc...Perhaps the reason he let Lee Lua and the other pilot start at Luang Prabang and Vientiane is because 20 A is not the best place to start flying combat from."*

Before long, even though it was not officially on record as such, there would actually be five squadrons in the RLAF when the Meo began keeping



Takeoff preparation for T-28 from 20A.  
FIGURE 11

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their aircraft over night at Vang Pao's headquarters at Long Tieng. Eventually, out of necessity, an AOC was established there as well.

#### More Internal Problems

On 5 March, a joint ARMA-AIRA-CAS-RO meeting was held in Vientiane to discuss further reorganization of the FAR and RLAF. Such problems as the relationship of the Ministry of Defense to the FAR General Staff, the authority of the FAR General Staff to move troops, and the extent of illegal activity of the FAR were considered. Many suggestions for reform emerged, among them a realignment of the logistics and supply system, improved methods of selecting key personnel for positions of responsibility, and more careful scrutiny of trainees. Of greatest significance for the RLAF were the decisions to draw up a model incentive pay system for pilots and to take a very close look at the precise organization of the RLAF. On the latter subject, the conferees concluded: <sup>53/</sup>

*"Among its many problems, the Royal Lao Air Force has no real understanding of its own organization, particularly the number of personnel in various categories of skills needed for its proper functioning. A study should be made based on manpower availability and functions to determine the best organization for the RLAF. Action: AIRA will investigate the possibility of a manpower study to be conducted with resources from within the United States Air Force."*

When the study was completed, more than a year later, some alarming discrepancies would be noted.

[REDACTED]

Of greatest concern to all U.S. agencies, however, was the problem of the "top leadership of the FAR," which was affecting "efficiency, morale, and the public image of the army." Unfortunately, few, if any, high-ranking officers had ever been legally relieved of their positions in the Lao military except as a result of coups or banishment. The power of the traditional families was just too great.

Nevertheless, this first careful scrutiny of the overall command and control problem would be of great help to the RLAF, but not for some time. In the meantime, a series of events caused further problems. In late March, a mock trial was held in Vientiane. The accused were General Ma and his co-conspirators, still in Thailand under political asylum. Convicted of "willful homicide," attempted homicide, and being an accomplice to attempted homicide, theft, and being an accomplice to theft," and "causing unlawful explosions," Ma and his pilots were sentenced in absentia to terms ranging from two years' imprisonment to 20 years in jail, loss of civil rights and rank, and confiscation of property. The latter penalty was given to General Ma.<sup>54/</sup>

At the same time, coup rumors were once again circulating, and attaches reported that certain RLAF officers had been observed making unexplained flights.<sup>55/</sup> On 21 March, an RLAF C-47 left Savannakhet ostensibly for Vientiane. On the flight were Lt. Colonel Bounsoth, Vientiane Base Commander, and Lt. Colonel Kongsana, Deputy Base Commander (later Commander) of Savannakhet. With them was Captain Chantasone,



1968

[REDACTED]

a U.S.-trained T-28 pilot who was among the most respected young officers in the RLAF. The flight terminated in Saigon, where the aircraft and crew were impounded by the South Vietnamese government. The cargo was a large amount of gold and opium.<sup>56/</sup>

Later, Captain Chantasone would tell an assistant air-attache that he had nothing to do with his selection as a crew-member on the trip, that his participation amounted to his carrying out a lawful order. He stated this operation "was his first big error and that he did not intend to repeat it." The attache concluded, "When he stated this was his first big error, I am not certain what he really meant--getting involved or getting caught."<sup>57/</sup>

The effect on RLAF morale was significant. A FAR colonel told an Embassy Political Officer:<sup>58/</sup>

*"The RLAF pilots were very unhappy about the government's decision not to request the release of the pilots and crew involved in the gold and opium smuggling in Saigon. The pilots believe that their colleagues are being made the 'fall guys' for 'hautes personalities'. Unless the government changes its mind, the pilots are threatening to strike and also to present the RLAF with a list implicating the various senior officials (presumably both military and civilian) who have ordered RLAF transport aircraft to be used for illicit activities."*

There were indications, said an attache, that "young RLAF officers were being 'set up' and that the senior officers of the FAR and RLAF were attempting to keep these young leaders from gaining power."<sup>59/</sup> Eventually,

[REDACTED]

after a great deal of adverse publicity, aircraft and crew were returned to Laos, but without their cargo. The two Lt. Colonels were reduced in grade to Major, and Captain Chantasone was temporarily grounded. Significantly, however, both senior officers retained their positions, as did the Luang Prabang Commander, Lt. Colonel Khamnong, who General Sourith believed to have been directing opium traffic at Ban Houie Sai, using a United States-furnished single sideband radio.<sup>60/</sup>

#### Reorganization

At this point, observers believed the RLAF was "drifting aimlessly in its daily activities."<sup>61/</sup> *20 min* Accordingly, a new organizational structure was being planned by May. This was to include "a general staff for the RLAF Commander and composite squadrons at each of the bases."<sup>62/</sup> One of the inequities had been that the base commander, usually a Lt. Colonel, far outranked the lieutenants and the occasional captain who commanded the fighter squadrons. Also being considered was a phaseout of the Thai Firefly team, even though they had been flying more than 50 percent of the T-28 sorties, at Udorn and Vientiane.<sup>63/</sup> The Thais would continue to fly, however, for the next two years, when RLAF force strength would be high enough to permit discontinuing this support.

Because of the functional problems within the RLAF and the belief by General Sourith that smuggling operations were definitely on the rise, on 25 July, AIRA proposed a realignment of USAF personnel at the RLAF bases to staff what would be a "modified Tactical Air Control System."

[REDACTED]

The Ambassador had told the FAR key personnel that "misuse of aircraft for personal gain... would no longer be tolerated and reforms must be initiated." AIRA also recommended that there be a reorganization of the USAF "advisory" effort at each AOC. The following were desired for each base: <sup>64/</sup>

1. Air Operations Specialist (T-28 IP qualified). Grade of Major; Fighter Background; Experience in Counterinsurgency Operations desired.
2. Para-medical--Cross-trained in Personal Equipment and as a Radio Operator.
3. Radio Operator--Maintenance qualified.
4. Flight Line Chief--recip qualified.
5. Aircraft Radio Technician.
6. AGE Specialist.
7. Munitions Specialist (conventional).
8. Weapons Mechanic (conventional).
- 9-10. Engine Mechanics(2) (Reciprocating Engines)

During the following month, introduction of a C-47 MTT into Thailand was also requested from USAF SOF assets and the modification of four RLAF C-47s with a .50 caliber side firing and flare drop capability. On 26 August 1968, the DEPCHIEF initiated the official request action for the gunship modification. <sup>65/</sup>

As more USAF personnel became assigned to the sites and more RLAF pilots were graduated from Udorn, sortie rates took a sizable leap, from

[REDACTED]

a little more than 8,000 during FY 68 to more than 14,000 the following fiscal year (Fig. 12). New aircraft brought total available T-28 strength to 60 by December, and for the first time in two years, the graduation of 10 students on 26 September brought the number of combat ready T-28 pilots to more than there had been just before General Ma had left (Fig. 13).

At the command level as well, slight but potentially important personnel changes were occurring. By 18 September, a new post with the title, Deputy Commander #2, was established to be filled by the former Chief of Staff, Lt. Colonel Boukeo, who had been left without a job when General Kouprasith's brother, Lt. Colonel Kouprasong returned to the RLAF from his attache assignments.<sup>66/</sup> Kouprasong would not last long as Chief of Staff, however, for, family connections aside, he was basically a superficial and insincere officer." Even though General Sourith's injunction was to "never mind, politics are involved, you know,"<sup>67/</sup> continued U.S. pressure and the growing realization that the RLAF needed more capable personnel at the staff level caused Lt. Colonel Kouprasong to be reassigned. Colonel Oudone, too, after a detailed investigation of his illegal activities by General Sourith, was "moved over" from the RLAF to the General Staff of the FAR. General Sourith said, with a surprising display of determination, "I am kicking him out of the Air Force."<sup>68/</sup> By the end of the year, a few of the stumbling blocks on the way to reorganization had been removed.

# T-28 COMBAT SORTIES ANNUAL TOTALS

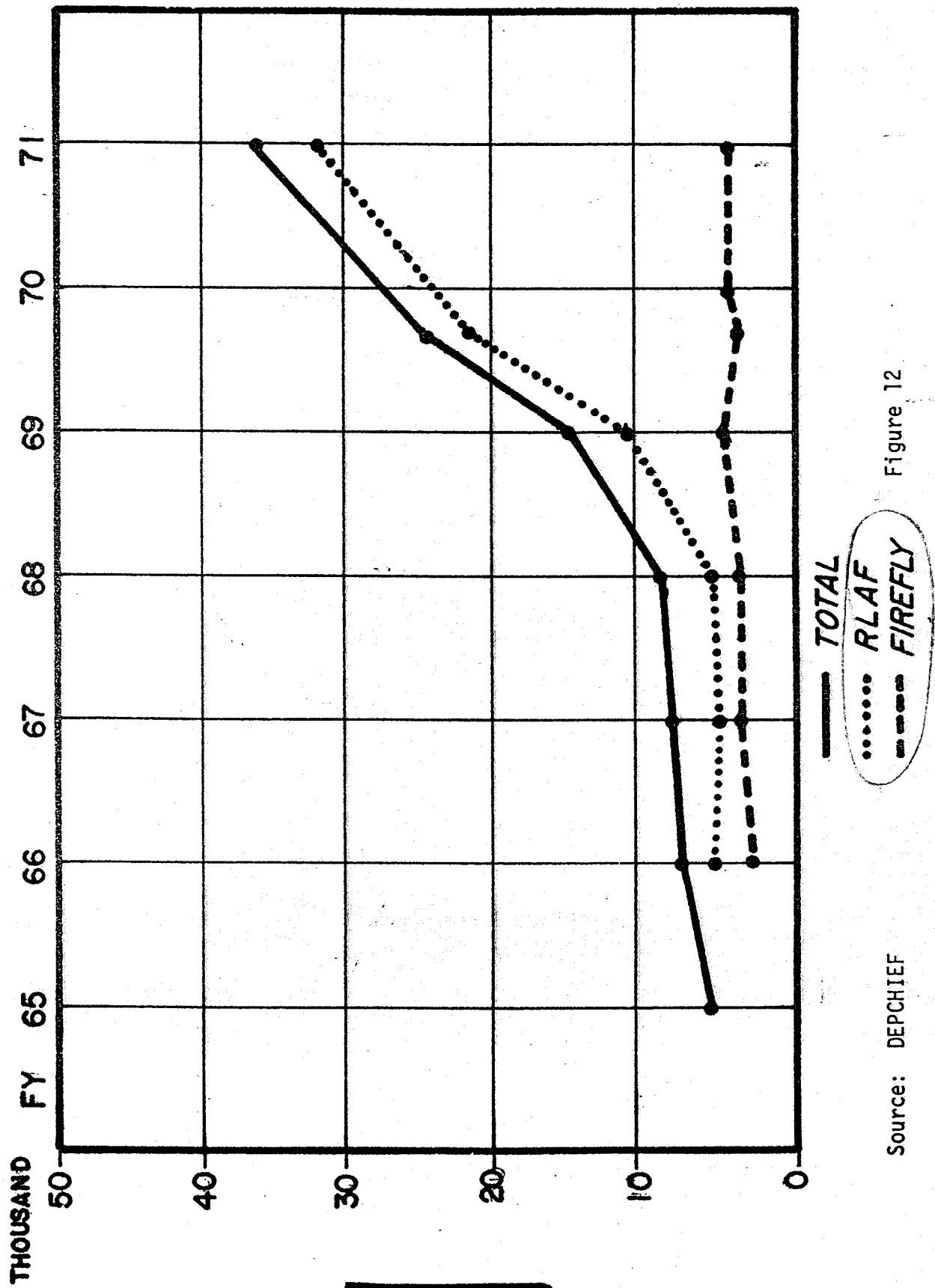


Figure 12

Source: DEPCHEIF

# RLAF PILOT INVENTORY

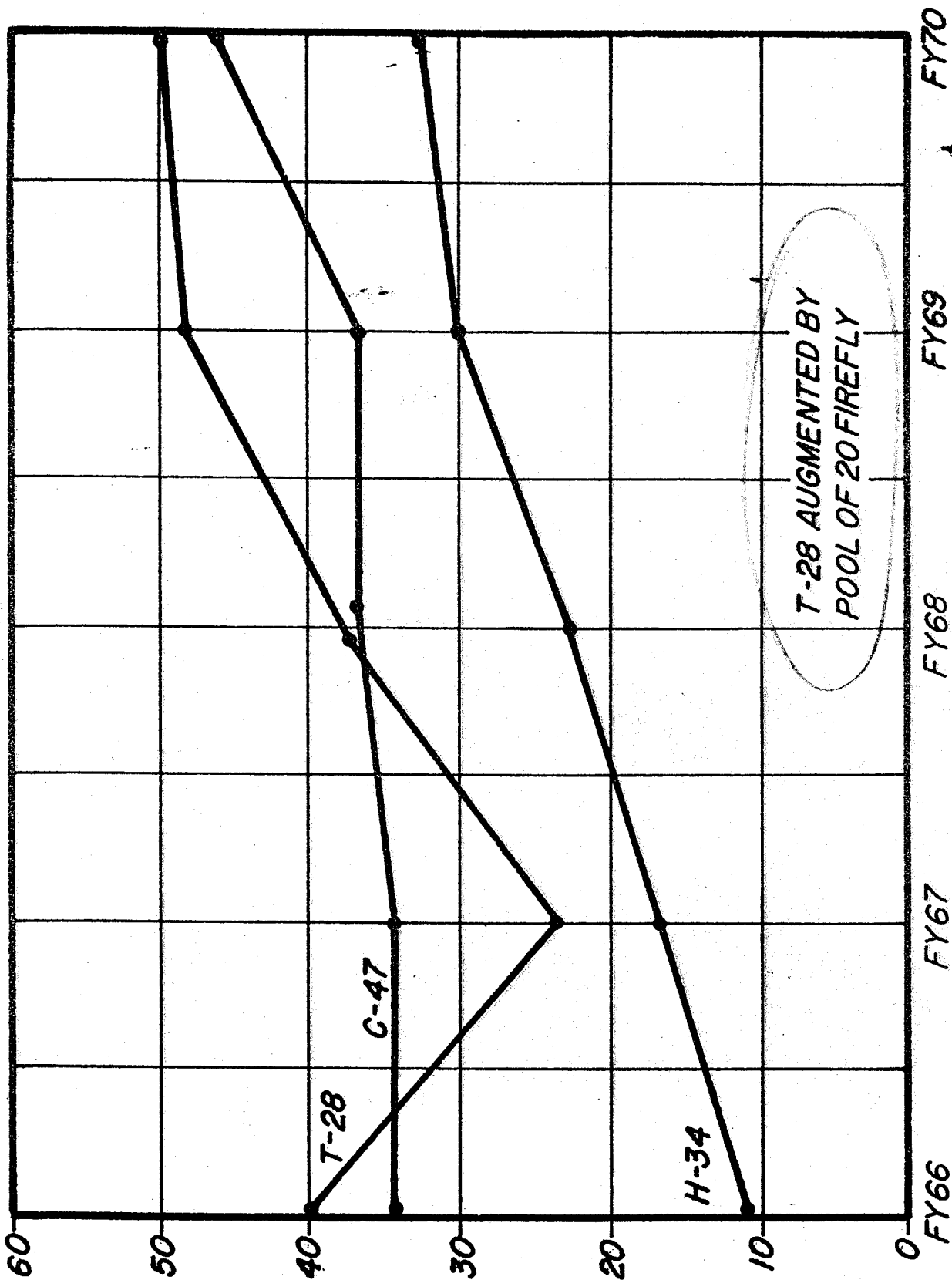


Figure 13

Source: DEPCHEIF

### Operations - 1968

Tactically, the year had not been a good one; but, despite the RLG loss of many strategic sites, for the first time since the RLAF inception, one large, combined air and ground operation demonstrated that the FAR and RLAF could work well together. On the negative side, the most significant loss after Nam Bac was that of Site 85, on Phou Pa Thai Mountain. Part of the 3,000 new NVA troops introduced into Laos, led by a crack sapper team, successfully captured this natural fortress and its tactical air navigation (TACAN) and MSQ equipment in March. Other smaller sites also fell, and large numbers of RLG troops and refugees had to be evacuated. In May, attacks on Site 36 were blunted only by the application of more than 60 USAF sorties per day; and in late 1968, an attempt by General Vang Pao to retake Site 85 failed, even though more than 1,000 USAF, Lao, and Thai sorties were flown against enemy defensive positions.

In Southern Laos, the NVA also reinforced their troops, and small, aggressive probes had succeeded by midyear in virtually isolating the small cities of Saravane, Attapeu, and Thakhek.<sup>69/</sup> In early August, the stronghold of Lao Ngam near the western foot of the Bolovens plateau was abandoned at the orders of the MR IV Commander, and by December, the enemy had taken the town of Tha Teng, just south of Saravane, and placed under siege the small garrison holed up in the fort.<sup>70/</sup>

### Houei Mune Offensive

The one major bright spot during the year was the MR III Houei Mune

[REDACTED]

offensive from 19-28 May. As was true of so many of the Laotian ground operations, success or failure depended upon the commander, and in this case the choice of Colonel Thao Ly was a good one. An attache said, "Ly is one of the few young Lao colonels who possesses the ability and charisma to get the most out of his resources and men, including the T-28 pilots." On 18 May, Colonel Ly called a joint planning conference in Seno for AIRA, ARMA, USAID/RO, and RLAF representatives. It was, according to the assistant air attache, "the first time...that air elements were briefed in detail on a planned FAR offensive." During previous attempts to clear the Houei Mune area, no coordination had been attempted, and the result had been failure. For a change, air-to-ground communications were excellent, and Colonel Ly personally briefed each fighter or FAC mission. By establishing his command post in the Savannakhet AOC, Colonel Ly enjoyed excellent and instantaneous communication with all command and field elements.

The RLAF portion of the operation was termed "outstanding". Often flying missions longer than two hours each, T-28 pilots made their scheduled takeoff times, flew cover for friendly troops, then dropped ordnance in the path of the planned advance. There was almost no contact with the enemy, but there were indications of hasty withdrawals, and major credit was given the T-28s for their excellent coverage. When



[REDACTED]

the operation was over, RLAF T-28s had flown 83 sorties for 83 percent of the total (USAF fighters contributed 16). On 29 May, Colonel Ly and T-28 Commander Capt. Chantasone (recently restored to flying status) celebrated the success of the operation:<sup>71/</sup>

*"During the victory celebration, they were waited on hand and foot by beautiful Lao maidens who even held their glasses to their lips while they drank. Colonel Ly stated that the enemy ran from airstrikes and that the Pathet Lao had told local villagers that Americans were flying strike aircraft. Colonel Ly told villagers to look at Chantasone--a Lao T-28 pilot--it was Lao pilots that made the enemy run--not Americans."*

The HOUEI MUNE operation was significant. It proved that an operation could succeed with proper planning, targeting, and coordination. This instance of RLAF/FAR cooperation in MR III would set an example, one which the other military regions, unfortunately, were altogether too slow to emulate.

#### Accomplishments and Requirements - 1968

At year's end, the RLAF was generally in much better shape, but only by Lao standards. One AOC Commander said, "The RLAF progress is steady but slow. So often the Americans make a big mistake--they try and grade the Lao by U.S. standards. It just won't work."<sup>72/</sup> Accomplishments, in addition to the HOUEI MUNE operation, included the first all-<sup>73/</sup> napalm day (13 September) for the T-28s from Savannakhet and the successful establishment of the AOC at Pakse in August. By 16 November,

[REDACTED]

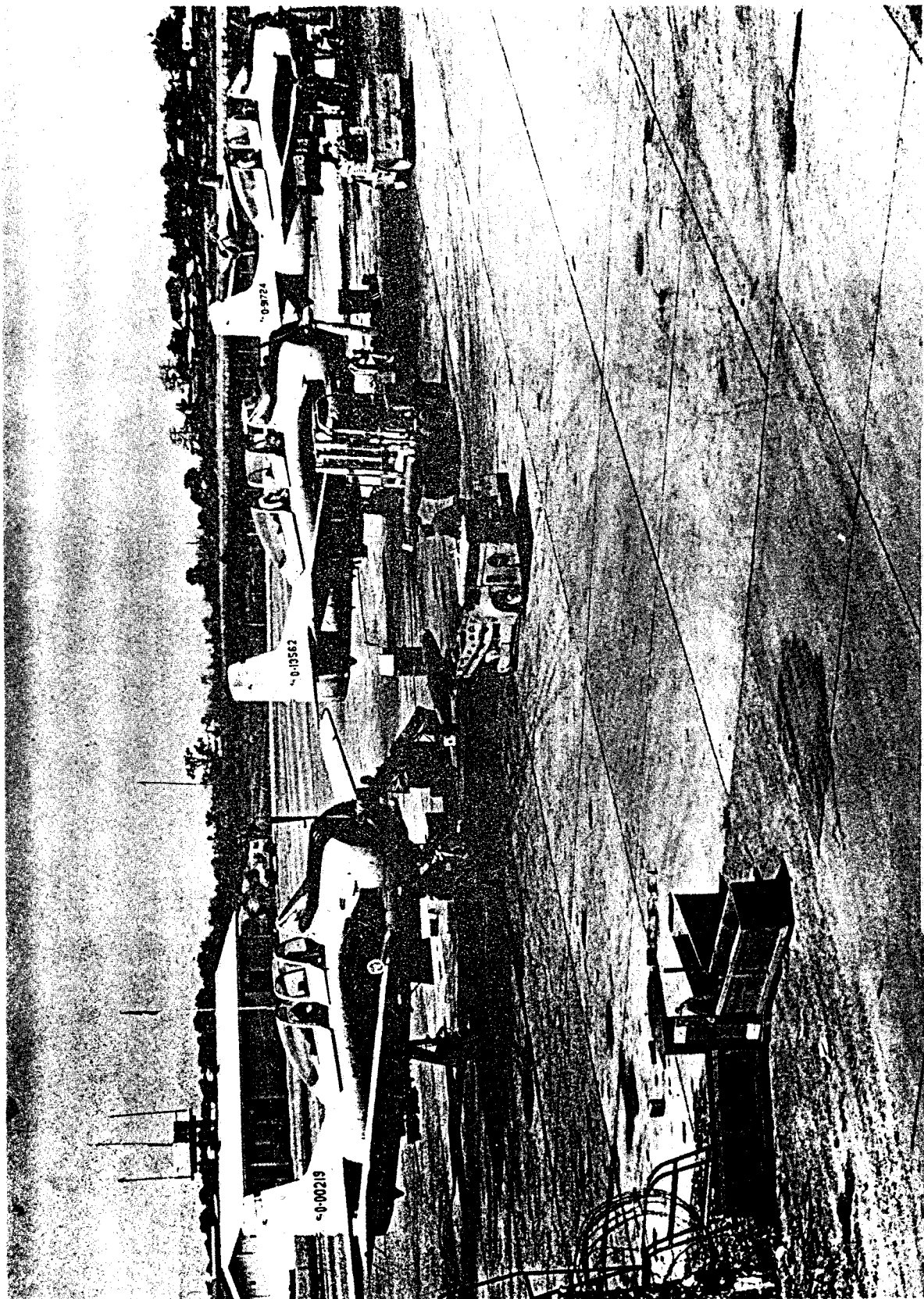
the AOC Commander could report that the MR IV Joint Operations Center (JOC) was "in being and fully operational". Previously, the combat potential of the six T-28s had not been used or appreciated; in fact, at one time the MR IV Chief of Staff had not known how many T-28s were combat ready. Improved communications between ground and air elements had been achieved, and the potential now existed in MR IV for a functioning command and control structure which could exploit all available assets. <sup>74/</sup>

To the north, the Long Tieng AOC Commander was so elated with the T-28s that he made the following statement: <sup>75/</sup>

*"The [Thai] Lao and Meo pilots have improved to the point where they do a better job than American Air. After getting more pilots and airplanes, the locals should be able to take over a larger responsibility in BARREL ROLL, possibly discontinuing American Air except for interdiction, special target, and troops in contact."*

As recognized by many officials, dedicated and eager young pilots alone do not make an air force function. There were the problems of supply and logistics, as well as the state of the RLAF training school at Savannakhet. Both of these operations were under scrutiny by the end of 1968, and each had a very long way to go. In May, for instance, the RO Aviation Branch Chief apprised General Sourith of the dismal state of affairs in one area of supply: <sup>76/</sup>

*"As you know, control of personal and survival equipment has been a major problem within your supply system. Although adequate funds have been programmed to cover these items, a lack of control and advanced planning*



Pakse T-28s in foreground of AOC.  
FIGURE 14

[REDACTED]

*has caused some of your crew members to fly with less than adequate equipment for their protection and survival in the event of an emergency."*

No standard lists of required items, failure to use proper procurement methods, and a refusal to keep supply records were among the discrepancies noted, as was the now familiar habit of "expecting support from Udorn rather than taking requisitioning methods."<sup>77/</sup> In fields other than personal equipment, too, the RLAF central supply depot at Savannakhet was in much less than satisfactory shape.

At Pakse there were U.S. supply problems as well:<sup>78/</sup>

*"Munitions resupply, or at least the resupply system, is currently unsatisfactory at this station. The RO representative does not automatically initiate procurement action on ordnance, even though the daily expenditure sheets show the inventory headed toward zero. Moreover, he does not recognize the munitions inventory authorization published by OUSAIRA as formally binding since it does not bear the RO seal of approval."*

All other sites reported similar supply discrepancies during 1968 as the RLAF increased in size and strength, and although the problems may have seemed minor at the time, from then on the small RO staff would be hard pressed to keep up with the demand.

As for maintenance, the Air America and WATERPUMP facilities at Udorn continued to do an excellent job, especially the former, in the area of aircraft rebuilding. In the field, however, the maintenance situation was still unsatisfactory:<sup>79/</sup>

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*"The RLAF is still far from self-sufficient in the aircraft maintenance areas although personnel are trained regularly and in sufficient numbers. RO/ USAID and Air Attache personnel assisted in-country in every way possible; however, the leadership, supervisory ability, and dedication within the RLAF are not sufficient to insure a quality effort. Inspections are being performed more in theory than in fact."*

An Air America mechanic had described a UH-34 brought in for unscheduled maintenance as a "flying accident going somewhere to happen," and the DEPCHIEF's conclusion in 1968 was that "the RLAF is probably doing more maintenance work itself than at any time in its history, but the quality is far too low to sustain operations."<sup>80/</sup> The quantity existed; by this time, more than 500 Lao mechanics had been trained by CONUS, MAP, and third country programs.<sup>81/</sup>

One of the reasons for the maintenance problems was U.S. inspired, the other, according to some Americans, was a characteristic of the Lao personality. Especially during a maximum effort, USAF maintenance advisers grew impatient with the minimally trained Lao and preferred often to do the work themselves to keep the aircraft flyable. An AOC Commander stated the problem succinctly:<sup>82/</sup>

*"I have not been entirely pleased with the attitude of USAF engine maintenance and munitions specialists. A highly skilled and motivated individual assigned to each one of these areas is absolutely essential and his ability to work effectively with foreign nationals is deemed critical to the successful accomplishment of our mission...I strongly recommend that personnel*

[REDACTED]

*source agencies at Udorn be advised of the requirement for men who are not only expert technicians, but also instructors who have patience, tact, and a desire to guide the efforts of semiskilled, unstandardized ground support teams."*

With increased manning requirements, however, USAF maintenance personnel were becoming more and more difficult to find. Even with the best of them, there was another problem, one which was perhaps even more difficult to solve. Another AOC Commander described it this way: <sup>83/</sup>

*"Supervisory problems are large. There just aren't any Lao NCOs who want to make enemies. It's part of the Lao personality. When a man gets to be an NCO, he's done his bit out on the line getting greasy and standing in the hot sun. Now he wants to sit in the shade, and he does. We've got a lot of trained shady-tree mechanics. But this is a problem which they must solve for themselves. The SOF people assigned to an AOC just don't have enough time to instruct the Lao. We're too busy doing our job."*

In addition to requirements for an improved supply and maintenance capability, the RLAF training capability was minimal at best. Because of the failure of the Savannakhet school to turn out enough C-47 pilots, the Ambassador had recommended that a USAF MTT be reestablished in Thailand. Equally necessary was an RLAF FAC capability. The five O-1 aircraft at Savannakhet were used strictly for training purposes, and no RLAF pilot had yet been qualified as a FAC. Early in the year, the need for an RLAF FAC program had been recognized by the DEPCHIEF, but his statement in April 1968 that "additional FACs are being trained and five

[REDACTED]

additional O-1A aircraft" would soon "perform FAC missions as part of the tactical air units of the RLAF"<sup>84/</sup> proved sadly in error. During 1968, no RLAF FACs were trained, and the additional aircraft would be used not by RLAF but by USAF Raven FACs, whose strength was increasing rapidly as more and more USAF airstrikes were flown after the cessation of missions over North Vietnam. Not until 1969 would an RLAF pilot become FAC-qualified, and he was destined never to direct an airstrike by himself.

As for training in general, the Savannakhet School was little more than a token effort. Output of RLAF student pilots had dropped sharply after a 1964 high of 26,\* but had risen on paper to a total of 51 graduates by the end of 1968.<sup>85/</sup> The AOC Commander at that site described the training situation:<sup>86/</sup>

*"Aircraft utilization of the L-19 for training purposes is extremely low. The Royal Laos Air Force possesses five L-19s at this station of which there were rarely two in commission. (A safe estimate would be less than 20% utilization.) Aircraft utilization is also affected by the absence of any flying schedule and the school being understaffed...Under present circumstances, instructor pilots fly when they want to, as much as they please...At present there are no guide lines established as to what an instructor pilot's responsibilities and work load are to consist of. The mismanagement and lack of directives are more than evident in the instructor's lackadaisical attitude."*

\*1965: 18; 1966: 0 (the Ma Coup); 1967: 26.

[REDACTED]

"Only the student participation and morale," said the AOC Commander, "were an asset to the program."<sup>87/</sup> The RLAF instructor pilots, some of them busy flying C-47s as well, did little more than introduce the fledgling pilots to the feel of flying.

In September, no doubt as a result of criticism, the Air Training School Commander published a syllabus of instruction. The stated objective was to "quickly train pilots who are capable of completing all the required missions in the Cessna O-1A." By the end of the course, students were expected to be able to do the following:<sup>88/</sup>

- . Land and take off on short terrain and from air-fields at high elevation.
- . Navigate by outside references.
- . Accomplish, according to his ability, various types of activities, usually with standards listed here.

A total of 110 hours flying time was required, including navigation and dual formation, as well as introductory courses in meteorology, engineering, military training, and 180 hours of English language training. Based on a 20-point maximum, a grade of below 5 in one course or an overall average of less than 8 would be cause for elimination. Scoring standards were as follows:<sup>89/</sup>

Perfect.....	20/20
Excellent.....	18, 19/20
Very Good.....	16, 17/20



[REDACTED]

Good .....	14, 15/20
Fair .....	12, 13/20
Passable .....	10, 11/20
Mediocre .....	8, 9/20
Bad .....	5, 6, 7/20
Nothing .....	1, 2, 3, 4/20

At that time, there were only three instructor pilots, one of whom was an American who also taught navigation, aerodynamics, and basic instruments. Of the students in Class 68A (16) and 68B (35), six would become what the Commander called the "100 hour pilots" and complete the entire program.<sup>90/</sup> Nearly all the others, having received from 10-30 hours of O-1 time, would eventually go to T-28 or H-34 training at Udorn. In 1968, the only linguistic prerequisite for admission to T-28 training was to have completed on paper the required hours of English instruction, with a grade of bad or above. This minimum requirement was to change for the better in 1970.

In addition, the lone C-47 pilot assigned to the school trained a handful of 100-hour graduates as copilots in that aircraft, and also upgraded T-28 pilots into the C-47. This practice would receive strong criticism in the future.

Accordingly, the training program at Savannakhet was embryonic at best, but "by Lao standards," at least functioning. With the problems of supply and maintenance as well, the RLAF was evaluated by many as being little advanced or improved from previous years. An AOC Commander said:<sup>91/</sup>

[REDACTED]

*"The command direction from upper echelons is almost entirely lacking. This is the major problem area, the effects of which are magnified in the lower echelon of the Royal Laos Air Force."*

In perspective, however, the RLAF had come a long way. Not including the Thai piloted aircraft at Vientiane, there were now 32 combat ready T-28s and crews flying from four operational RLAF bases,<sup>92/</sup> each with a functioning AOC and all except Vientiane targeted much of the time by a varying effective JOC. Although targeting methods and accuracy had improved only slightly (a written fragmentation order, for example, was introduced in one JOC late in 1968), the greatest indication of future improvement by the end of 1968 was not only evidence of command and control evolution, but principally the increased efficiency of U.S.-maintained, repaired, and supplied RLAF T-28s. In December, total sorties flown amounted to 1,526, the highest in the history of the RLAF.<sup>93/</sup> The young Lao pilots had finally recovered from the loss of General Ma.



## CHAPTER IV

### OPERATIONAL NECESSITY AND THE SORTIE EXPLOSION: 1969

There were few signs of optimism as the new year began. Despite the record performance of the T-28s and the additional USAF air support, RLG forces were not only losing the initiative but there were indications by mid-1969 that Souvanna Phouma's government might even be about to lose the war. In many ways, it was to be a record year. Not even in 1964 or 1966 had the outlook for the RLG changed as drastically as it did in 1969, going from extremely poor in May and June to overwhelmingly favorable by December.

Many records were set: most RLAF T-28 sorties ever; most USAF sorties as well; most combat ready T-28s; and the first RLAF AC-47 operations. On the ground, the enemy would make the farthest encroachment yet into RLG territory, but in two military regions, the RLG forces would turn about and themselves move deeper into NVA/PL-dominated areas than they had done since the Geneva Accords.

There was a sizable increase in U.S. support as well, and a further personnel augmentation within and outside of Laos. Accordingly, as the war enlarged dramatically, attempts to resolve the recurring problems of RLAF manning, maintenance, supply, and command did produce some results, but not as many as had been hoped. Because of the stepped up pace of the war, United States personnel in 1969 assumed more and more

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responsibilities as the logistics and materiel requirements of the RLAF hit new highs. And, added to the usual rumblings and disagreements within the RLAF itself, would be some problems of communication among the widely spread U.S. support agencies--DEPCHIEF, [CAS], RO/USAID, and AIRA--as intelligence, targeting, training, and supply demands severely taxed the complex machinery which had been established for a war one-tenth its present size. There were many who might recall the U.S. intention, stated earlier in this report, "not to get involved in Laos." After seven years of [clandestine] assistance to the RLG and the RLAF, the United States was now very deeply involved.

#### United States Assistance

AIRA's request through the Ambassador to Laos on 9 November 1968 for a C-47 MTT was approved by Thai officials on 1 December 1968. Subsequent approval by USAF followed, and on 19 February 1969, the RTG granted permission for the C-47 MTT to be located at Udorn. By 28 February, all 24 USAF members of the MTT were in Thailand.<sup>1/</sup> On 10 March 1970, the first Lao class arrived--six pilots, six crew chiefs, and six mechanics. Two of the pilots were to be upgraded to instructor pilots; the others, who possessed various flying experience, were to be qualified as pilots. AC-47 operations were included as part of the curriculum. Later, eight gun mechanic/loaders were to be included in this first class.<sup>2/</sup> Shortly afterward, the U.S. Ambassador to Laos noted with alarm that there was a "movement afoot to propose that the team become a permanent fixture

[REDACTED]

at Udorn." Citing what he called the "bitter price" which had been paid in Laos when TDY SOF personnel were replaced with one-year PCS advisers, the Ambassador requested that the MTT continue to be manned by TDY volunteers from SOF resources, not by "a group of middle-aged staff officers who maintain a modicum of straight and level C-47 proficiency by support flying." He predicted in closing that he foresaw no need for the C-47 MTT to exist for more than one year to eighteen months at the most.<sup>3/</sup>

The entire first class, plus the gun mechanics, were graduated on 1 August 1969. According to the instructors, the AC-47 crews were "the equals of their USAF counterparts at an equal level of training." The Lao pilots, the report said, "eagerly await the first RLAF AC-47 combat operation."<sup>4/</sup> In December, with a second and larger C-47 class underway, the DEPCHIEF noted that the Ambassador to Laos had estimated that the RLAF would be able to begin a self-sufficient training program by January 1972, and recommended that the C-47 MTT continue to be staffed by TDY personnel, at least through the fourth MTT.<sup>5/</sup>

A request for an in-country MTT, however, had been disapproved by the Embassy. On 1 May, the Udorn MTT Commander had proposed that Lao graduates of the USAF MTT be permitted to establish their own course at Savannakhet, instructing the same procedures and techniques that were being taught at Udorn, including gunship weapons maintenance. "In order

[REDACTED]

to accomplish this task and give the RLAF the capability of self-supporting operational training in-country," the Commander said, only three U.S. civilian technical advisers would be needed, to include a GS-15 Airborne Technical Training Adviser team chief. Total estimated cost for this proposal during a six-month TDY period would be \$18,769.00. For the present 24-man USAF MTT, the six-month cost was \$109,718.00. The Commander's final recommendation was that the "military MTT be continued through the second cycle, graduating more instructor-qualified personnel, after which the in-country program could then absorb the entire training program."<sup>6/</sup>

On 11 June, the Air Attache (who had endorsed the suggestion) notified the MTT Commander the proposal had been rejected for three reasons:<sup>7/</sup>

- (1) to avoid additional U.S. personnel in Laos;
- (2) avoid accusations that we were violating the Geneva Accords by training in Laos; and
- (3) prevent Lao overdependence on the United States.

Embassy guidance was to select a Lao officer in the next class who could direct such a school, offer him a "concentrated, in-depth exposure" to MTT organization and administration," and have the Lao start the school themselves.<sup>8/</sup> As had happened so often before, however, operational requirements in-country were to take precedence over training, and as the RLAF AC-47 assets began to arrive, more and more pilots would be needed to man them. As a result, during 1969 there was little emphasis placed upon training RLAF C-47 pilots to establish and run an MTT of their own.<sup>9/</sup>

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The WATERPUMP T-28 program also experienced modifications, with incoming student classes increased from 12 to 18 per class after December 1968.<sup>10/</sup> Flying combat missions themselves on weekends, the WATERPUMP instructor pilots also managed to average at least two strike sorties for each of their students in the year's second class.<sup>11/</sup> An early WATERPUMP instructor, later an AOC Commander in Laos, lauded this procedure: "At first, there was no programmed USAF combat flying, but when it started, there was much more rapport between the Lao students and their instructors."<sup>12/</sup>

In addition to expanded training, USAF/RLAF T-28 assets were also increased, but not without a series of problems which indicated more troubles to come. Stated simply, T-28s were becoming hard to obtain. The prescribed RLAF T-28 strength had been set at 53 (including Udorn training); by mid-1969 there were 60 aircraft actually possessed; and the U.S. Ambassador to Laos believed that a minimum of 77 was required. After a lengthy series of requests and turndowns because of "insufficient assets," the Ambassador wired the Secretary of State that according to his information there were a total of 896 T-28s possessed by the USAF, USN, foreign governments, and commercial concerns. "It would not seem unreasonable," he said, "to expect that with proper effort, imagination, and cooperation within the U.S. government, our modest request for an increase of 24 aircraft could be met." After all, he added, "in Laos we have the only active war in the world in which MASF T-28s form an integral part." Late in the year, after many more messages to USAF and governmental agencies,

[REDACTED]

the Ambassador was to get part of his request, and by 31 December, the first six of a promised 22 additional T-28s had arrived at Udorn, in crates.

Although the aircraft were there, the difficulties did not end. Severe management problems ensued. According to the DEPCHIEF's Chief of Staff, "the application of advance attrition aircraft" to bolster the fleet caused maintenance and ordnance support requirements which had not been programmed and which would require a further shortfall in planned expenditures.<sup>13/</sup> And because WATERPUMP was still manned for only 53 aircraft, there was insufficient manpower to handle them. Uncertain until the last minute when and how many aircraft would arrive, the WATERPUMP Commander remarked wryly, "I'm just going to leave the aircraft in the crates until someone straightens this mess out."<sup>14/</sup> Shortly afterward, TDY augmentees would arrive, and the new T-28s would be made combat ready.

Of all the means by which the U.S. increased its assistance to the RLAF in 1969, one stands out as possessing the greatest long-term significance. An outgrowth of the 5 March 1968 meeting in Vientiane, the proposed manpower survey of RLAF personnel was completed by 15 December 1968. What had seemed to be "a hopeless task" three months earlier, said the RO Aviation Branch Chief, had succeeded, as a result of a combination of dogged research, luck, and cooperation from the RLAF. Now in existence was the first accurate computer listing of RLAF personnel,



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their training records, and their present assignments. To build this roster, RO and AIRA had done the following: <sup>15/</sup>

*"We began by assembling old Invitational Travel Orders, transferring the data on punch cards and printing a consolidated roster. We then went to RLAF Hq and each base and obtained Base and Unit rosters to compare assignment with training; most of the rosters were in French and Lao, some were part Lao and part French; additionally, one hand-written copy had French names and Lao serial numbers. These rosters were translated and transcribed to punch cards and printed. Finally, the November payroll was compared to the previous ones to update the information and cross-check for persons possibly being paid on two different unit payrolls and/or nonexistent names being paid. This completed, we found only approximately six people on two payrolls in November being paid twice, we found two dead people still being paid, plus two prisoners, one deserter, and one transferred to the FAR. All other names appear to be valid. It might be worthy to note that there are approximately 125 people on Savannakhet's payroll that do not appear on the Savannakhet Base roster and possibly do not have a job. RLAF will be asked to identify the jobs these people are performing."*

By using this roster, AIRA and RO were shortly to recommend some important changes in RLAF manning and training assignments.

#### RLAF--Coherence or Confusion

In April 1969, AIRA assessed the state of the RLAF, finding the same leadership problems and the same trend toward decentralization as had been noted the year before. Additionally, however, it was apparent that the RLAF personnel as well as the population were becoming "war

weary--they have been fighting a war for a generation and are weak, poor, and tired." The results of the growing decentralization were not encouraging: <sup>16/</sup>

*"With the lack of strong leaders within the air force, the RLAF apparently will remain at the mercy of the FAR leaders. This being the case, unfortunately, the aircraft are not always used in support of the war effort."*

To improve the situation, renewed emphasis was placed on the establishment of a Combat Operations Center (COC) at Vientiane, but there were some built-in obstacles, as one Assistant Attache testified: <sup>17/</sup>

*"As far as corruption and dishonesty goes, one of the ideas in getting the COC going was to stop the opium traffic by scheduling every aircraft from a central point. I don't think it will work. They'll fly the stuff anyway, but they'll either lie or not report the flight."*

In addition to approving plans for an operational COC, the RLAF was displaying what a Requirements Office representative called a "spurt of energy" toward general reorganization itself, putting forth new efforts to achieve the four-composite-squadron-concept submitted to them the previous year. <sup>18/</sup>

Not all U.S. agencies agreed with the composite squadron plan. PACAF, for one, did not at first approve: <sup>19/</sup>

*"The reorganization of the RLAF into four composite squadrons will in effect place all the problems of each individual weapons system on the*

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materiel manager in each composite squadron. Conversely, there will be no one at the problem-solving level with an RLAF-wide view of the problems of one particular fleet. In effect, the materiel managers' efforts are dissipated when they should be concentrated to a scope within their capability; i.e., four squadrons are independently solving identical problems. Problems seem to multiply in direct proportion to the number of different weapons systems while the actual number of aircraft in one particular fleet is of lesser importance. Thailand has already tried and discarded the composite squadron concept for these very reasons. It is realized that RLAF materiel management is relatively embryonic and that the initial simplicity of the composite set-up is tempting. However, it is recommended that the concept be closely scrutinized. If adopted now, it is an ultimate certainty that as the RLAF matures, the composite concept is discarded in an effort to improve RLAF-wide system management to achieve realistic operationally ready rates and flying hour utilization."

The Deputy Chief, however, backed the suggestion, and in doing so delineated a difference of opinion between contributing agencies, a difference which did not so much concern methods as it did U.S. overall policy toward the RLAF. The DEPCHIEF said, "Finalized studies revealed that a composite squadron concept is the most feasible method of responding to tactical requirements which is, until hostilities cease, the primary concern of the RLAF and the U.S. augmented Air Operations Centers with primary control in Vientiane." Expansion was also required "due to increases in the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao activity."<sup>20/</sup>

The U.S. Charge to Laos further spelled out U.S. intentions at that time:<sup>21/</sup>

*"Discussion of composite squadron concept as applied to RTAF is valid. However, objectives for RTAF and tactical requirements in Laos substantially differ. As stated in UE study there is no plan for RLAF to become self-sufficient to extent of supporting total aircraft inventory of composite squadrons. Composite squadron concept with U.S. augmented Air Operations Centers with central control in Vientiane is most feasible method of responding to tactical requirements. RLAF, until hostilities cease, is primarily concerned with tactical operations and associated airlift. Country team provides major central control function for both operations and logistics. Members of country team serve as counterparts of RLAF commander to assist in single managing of logistics and operations. Other personnel augment at squadron level to advise on operations functions rather than to solve operational and logistics planning needs. Weapons systems are therefore managed at country team/RLAF level using contractual support. Only flight line maintenance and daily operation requirements performed at composite squadron."*

As a result, CINCPAC recommended to JCS on 15 March that the four-composite-squadron-reorganization be adopted, <sup>22/</sup> and by June, plans for the reorganization were in motion, drafted under the overall mission <sup>23/</sup> as defined by the Country Team:

- . Fight the war to a successful conclusion; then organize the Air Force toward a self-sufficient Air Force.
- . Obtain maximum participation from the Lao in all fields of aviation support and augment above their capability by contract to support 1.
- . Support only personnel actually required and who can be utilized to accomplish the primary mission.
- . Induce the RLAF to provide tactical logistical air support to the five military regions.
- . Obtain maximum utilization of MAP-supplied equipment.

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In short, at mid-1969, the U.S. assistance program to the RLAF was intended to develop maximum tactical efficiency, not self-sufficiency.

In line with this policy, the graduation on 19 June of six additional Meo T-28 pilots <sup>24/</sup> permitted full-scale operations out of Vang Pao's Long Tieng headquarters (Site 20A), a development which distressed the Ambassador but one which he felt was necessary: <sup>25/</sup>

*"None of us are happy operating T-28s out of Twenty Alternate, but psychologically it is a must, and all of us including of course AIRA, believe that this is one of the risks we must face. Dispersion of our small fleet is not at all helpful, for it gives us one more forward operating site to be supported; but at the same time, I can assure you that flying T-28s out of Twenty Alternate has done more to improve Vang Pao and his troops' morale than any other single action we have taken."*

The RLAF, too, was not particularly ecstatic, and a series of incidents in the months following hampered operations slightly. On 15 August, the Vientiane AOC Commander stated that he did not know what the status of the RLAF was at his base. An RLAF order had limited the number of aircraft operating out of Vang Pao's headquarters to four, <sup>26/</sup> but at the same time, seven Meos and two Lao RLAF pilots were being carried on the books at 20A. <sup>27/</sup> The RLAF, still attempting to integrate the Meo pilots into the normal system, had planned a regular rotation of pilots from Vientiane to 20A, but neither the Meo nor the Lao apparently wanted such a program. A similar request from CAS through AIRA to the RLAF that two Lao helicopters be temporarily stationed at 20A received no support,

causing an Assistant Attache to remark, "Probably the RLAF thought the idea rather ill advised, as they don't want VP to have his own air force." As a result, an "emergency request" was "made to 7AF/13AF at Udorn to acquire CH-3 helicopter support from USAF for the month of September."<sup>28/</sup>

Further conflicts ensued. On 12 September, five RLAF pilots from Vientiane refused to return to 20A,<sup>29/</sup> and again on 19 December, an Assistant Attache remarked that there were T-28s not being used at Vang Pao's headquarters because some RLAF pilots still refused to return and fly, having had personality clashes with the general himself and his Meo-speaking Forward Air Guides (FAGs).<sup>30/</sup> The planned rotation of RLAF and Meo pilots had not succeeded, and by the end of the year, Vang Pao in effect did have his own air force with an operational AOC and nine USAF Raven FACs whose primary job was directing USAF airstrikes in MR II.

#### RLAF Training

Faced with the ever-increasing tactical requirements, the RLAF Air Training School at Savannakhet showed little or no development during 1969, but one trend which alarmed some U.S. advisers became apparent. The RLAF "100-hour-course" in 1968 had produced just six lightplane pilots;<sup>31/</sup> accordingly, C-47 upgrading at Savannakhet had to draw either from experienced RLAF T-28 pilots or those which one Assistant Attache called "the RLAF pilots who are not acceptable for our MTT."<sup>32/</sup> Of greatest concern was the loss of the T-28 pilots.

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There were two aspects of the dilemma, however, for many of the RLAF T-28 pilots were by now approaching 1,000 combat missions. Some had even more. Transitioning to the C-47 was the only way a pilot could avoid what an AOC Commander called "the T-28 pilot's fate: You fly until you die."<sup>33/</sup> Nevertheless, draining some of the most experienced assets from the RLAF strike force caused one AOC Commander to remark bitterly:<sup>34/</sup>

*"Lts. Sayfa (L-39), Suwon (L-08), and Phouma (L-54) have followed orders, and thus three of the most experienced tactical pilots, and certainly the best trained in this country, are attending [C-47] ground school to learn just how to smuggle and haul passengers for hire. If that statement sounds bitter, it is only because of the utter futility of the situation as felt by the individual. Lt. Vath, Lt. Sayfa's temporary replacement, is a very conscientious individual and a fairly good pilot. However, he does not possess the experience, the judgment, nor the leadership potential of the aforementioned individuals. To date, he has received no orders confirming his position."*

Included in the C-47 upgrading were the only two CONUS-trained T-28 instructor pilots, a transfer which caused the RLAF Chief of Operations to say later, "When the two IPs left the T-28, I was so angry, but there was nothing I could do about it."<sup>35/</sup>

Also at Savannakhet, the first attempt to qualify an RLAF pilot as a Forward Air Controller was thwarted despite an intensive upgrading effort by two assigned Raven FACs. With the O-1s originally programmed for an RLAF FAC school now being used for combat missions, plans were postponed to develop a course of instruction run by the RLAF. Instead,

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USAF Raven FACs were asked to instruct two available RLAF student pilots <sup>36/</sup> in FAC procedures. One of the pilots described the results:

*"In May 1969, when I first got there, I worked as an IP in the FAC school. We had two Lao students then, Peng and Ratsume Sanannikone. As Ravens, we split our time, FACing half a day, acting as IPs the other half. When Verso (the other Raven FAC) came over, he was told he was to be the FAC IP, but there was never any real program set up. Then Tom Verso got hepatitis, and everything stopped until he got out of the hospital in July. Then we picked up again, and had to start from scratch. We would put the student in the front seat after a few back seat FAC missions and conduct a simulated FAC strike. There were briefings and debriefings, and we made up a syllabus as we went along. There was no formal program. We flew when we could. Ratsume used to go off to Vientiane often, and we didn't really know when he would be available to fly. Both students wanted to be FACs, but Peng had a lot of problems. I let Ratsume work USAF Hoboes, and he did a pretty good job. I didn't let him work the jets. When we graduated him, we made up a certificate and gave it to him."*

Lieutenant Ratsume, however, would never direct a solo strike. After his successful "graduation" on 18 August, he returned to Savannakhet from leave with orders to check out in the U-17. He had been told not to fly as a FAC, a result of pressure from the powerful Sanannikone family whose members controlled much of the military. With unfortunate irony, Lt. Ratsume Sanannikone would shortly be killed in the crash of the only U-17 assigned to the Savannakhet Air Training School. <sup>37/</sup>

#### RLAF Pay and Support Functions

One of the recommendations made at the 5 March 1968 joint meeting



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had been to investigate the feasibility of incentive pay for the RLAF. On 1 June 1969, a suggestion made to AIRA, based upon a cumulative and projected sortie rate of 1,200 sorties per month, established a standard combat pay procedure. Pilots were to be paid 500 Kip (\$1.00) per sortie, an amount which was to provide an additional \$26.52 per month to each pilot.<sup>38/</sup> With extremely low base and flight pay, the RLAF pilots badly needed a raise.

Called "combat rations," this pay was to be provided by CAS through the AOC Commander who, after determining the exact amount per pilot, would then distribute the money. Partially, as a result, the RLAF sortie rate soared in late summer. At Vientiane, for example, in October during one week, the "sortie production was so high...that our bomb dump has not been able to keep sufficient ordnance built up to support mission requirements." The next week was worse: "Our ordnance expenditure has been so high...that after Friday, the 25th, we will not have any bombs to load."<sup>39/</sup> Other bases reported the same phenomenon. At Pakse, the squadron exceeded its programmed sortie rate for August and September. On 1 November, according to the AOC Commander, "CAS furnished combat sortie pay...and it was distributed the same day. As a result, the sortie rate is starting out high the first week of November." Contrary to rumors which had been circulating, many of the RLAF pilots were still flying conscientiously, as the Pakse AOC Commander attested: "The missions have not been flown out to the closest point to drop on trees and monkeys in an attempt to

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add up more sorties. Instead, nearly all flights have been controlled by Raven FACs." The AOC Commander added, "However, this could not have been accomplished if it were not for the hard work that the U.S. maintenance personnel have been doing to keep the aircraft in flying condition and the munitions ready to load."<sup>40/</sup>

Although pilots on an individual basis chose to give a certain percentage of their combat pay to their ground crews, there was no prescribed formula established or enforced. Consequently, some bases experienced problems of a new sort. During the first week of September, Savannakhet logged an extremely low sortie rate. There were a variety of reasons, <sup>41/</sup> said the AOC Commander:

*"First and foremost is a mass refusal of 34 assigned line personnel to load munitions and maintain aircraft because the more they work, the more the pilots fly, and they don't feel they should be required to work so hard just so pilots can earn more sortie pay (combat rations). Actually, the pilots attempted to alleviate this problem last month by donating 10 percent of their combat rations plus profits from CBU dispensers, etc., to the maintenance personnel. If Savannakhet had a normal Operations/maintenance complex or even a decent base commander, this should have been effective. The basic problem is one of organization."*

What another AOC Commander called "an interesting pay discrepancy" <sup>42/</sup> soon occurred. In his words:

[REDACTED]

*"The T-28 pilots receive 'combat ration' pay based upon sorties which last 40 minutes or more. The most a man can usually fly is five or six a day. The H-34 guys, however, can get in 15-20 missions a day. At a dollar a mission, that's quite a difference. Also, we have to take their word on the number of missions--we have no way to check it."*

Despite discrepancies and the fact that groups of pilots took care of their ground crews in different ways, the combat pay provided a much needed boost for the young RLAF pilots.

As pointed out by the Savannakhet AOC Commander, however, organization at the local level of the RLAF still remained a major problem. So did logistics and supply. In April, for instance, a Savannakhet AOC Commander called the supply problem "overriding":<sup>43/</sup>

*"This covers the whole spectrum from the procedure of requesting supplies through actual receipt of the items. This is not limited to aircraft parts, because many other support functions are just as important as the aircraft in-commission rate. For example, the last 60 days we have had only one fork-lift operating and when it breaks down for more than 24 hours, the complete strike operation ceases because we are unable to get bombs to the aircraft."*

The Luang Prabang AOC Commander agreed: "Supply is probably the largest single problem confronting the bases."<sup>44/</sup> AIRA concurred as well: "The capability of the RLAF to even distribute supplies which have been given to it is limited." Reasons were "poor command and control, lack of understanding of personnel operating the system, and lack of communications."<sup>45/</sup>

[REDACTED]

Drastic changes in supply procedures were in progress, but the new rationale behind the RLAF supply operation was not clear to the Savannakhet AOC Commander:<sup>46/</sup>

*"Within the area of supply, if our mission is to train the local Air Force to be self-sufficient, removing them from the supply function will not provide a workable operation, unless we plan to maintain in-country personnel indefinitely. I realize we have an excessive amount of pilferage within the supply system, but I personally feel we should try to get this to some acceptable level and allow them to continue to supply their own units."*

As mentioned before, RLAF self-sufficiency, was not, in 1969, the primary advisory mission. Accordingly, in mid-1969 the main in-country depot was moved from Savannakhet to Vientiane and placed under direct Requirements Office control. "Our goal," said an RO representative, "is to turn this facility back to the Lao when they develop the capabilities and establish the necessary controls." From that time on, only mission-essential spares and equipment, housekeeping items, and expendables for a 30-day stockage would be kept at the individual base supplies.<sup>47/</sup> By the end of 1969, it was hoped that at least some major problems in RLAF supply had been solved.

#### RLAF Gunships

Early in 1969, the DEPCHIEF's June 1968 request for a .50 caliber side-firing modification to the RLAF C-47s was tabled by the Chief of Staff, pending a review of funds.<sup>48/</sup> On 13 March, the first USAF AC-47

[REDACTED]

Spooky flew in support of RLG forces under attack,<sup>49/</sup> and subsequent missions proved that gunship support was the most effective means of stopping an enemy which had begun to stage his attacks mainly at night. More than a year after the initial request, on 25 July 1969, the DEPCHIEF was promised the first gunship for training purposes. Despite the need in Vietnam for the AC-47s, it had been a "year long frustration" for the USAF representative at DEPCHIEF:<sup>50/</sup>

*"It has been extremely hard to understand and explain to the Deputy Chief (Army) and to the Ambassador to Laos why it has taken over one year to obtain approval to modify four C-47s with a simple .50 Cal. capability or to obtain the release of SUU-11A kits which appeared to have been in excess to USAF requirements."*

Very shortly, not only would SUU-11 kits be available, but there would soon be a gunship flood. First 5 AC-47s, then 8, and eventually 12 would be provided, as USAF assets were phased out of Laotian operations.

The first AC-47 crew was graduated from the Udorn MTT on 1 August, having received additional AC-47 combat training which consisted of 20 hours of flying time and 7 targets struck on 5 nights of flying. Recorded comments by the USAF AC-47 instructor were brief: "Capt Tousane flew one-half of the total effective mission time. Tactical Air Navigation (TACAN) new to him. Wants to talk in Lao. Can't read maps too well. Very good stick and rudder. Above average shot. Gunner throws up all the time."

[REDACTED]


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The instructor did not, an assistant attache reported, want to say that the crew was incapable, but that they should start slowly and be closely supervised. He also recommended that either a USAF Spooky or a Udorn MTT Instructor Pilot be sent TDY to assist with briefing and planning but not to fly combat.<sup>51/</sup> This latter recommendation was not carried out for some time.

AIRA suggestions were to immediately procure SUU-11 technicians to keep the trouble-plagued guns in firing order, establish firm communication and control procedures, and plan a program of orientation and training before the crew began to fly combat. The assistant attache said, "The capability of the RLAF Spooky program has been seriously overestimated. This will be a disappointment to many, but much worse would be a disaster with the first aircraft." Adding that the first aircraft was ready for pick up at Udorn, he said he did not think it was really wanted right away but concluded, "I don't know how to stall it off."<sup>52/</sup>

The first RLAF AC-47 in Vientiane arrived five days later. "Whether the bird will be here or at Luang Prabang has not been made known to me," said the AOC Commander.<sup>53/</sup> Initially flown to Luang Prabang, the RLAF Spooky was soon returned to Vientiane as mechanical problems began to mount. The Luang Prabang AOC Commander listed some of the urgent problems:<sup>54/</sup>

- . Point-to-point and air-to-ground communications.
- . Location of alert facilities.

- 
- . Who has operational control of aircraft.
  - . Aircraft and gun maintenance personnel.
  - . Spare parts and tools.
  - . Ramp space for aircraft.
  - . FAGs for more of the field units.
  - . Lao pilots' fear of flying at night in a combat zone and in the mountains.

On the first three missions flown in September, the guns would not fire at all, <sup>55/</sup> and by the end of the month as RLAF pilots in Savannakhet began to hear that they would be getting some AC-47s, the AOC Commander there had questions of his own: <sup>56/</sup>

- . How many will be assigned Savannakhet as home station?
- . Will assignment status be same as other C-47s or T-28s?
- . Approximately when may they be expected?
- . What provisions have been made for maintenance of aircraft? Weapons system?
- . Are these aircraft equipped with a flare dispensing system?
- . Has a supply source been established for weapons system spares and special tools? Ammunition?

Two weeks later, having received an AC-47 at Savannakhet, the AOC Commander summarized the progress to date: <sup>57/</sup>

[REDACTED]

*"The AC-47 program has gone over like the proverbial lead balloon. To quote a conscientious crew-member: 'The aircraft will not fly, but if it could fly, I cannot talk to the troops because the radios do not work, and if the radios worked I cannot help them because the guns do not shoot.' Despite the initial flops, local interest in the program remains high, and the residents of Keng Kok are still a little puzzled and awed by the strange 'DAKOTA' that shot 'ROCKETS' all over their lake."*

That same week, a 7AF team, headed by the Director of Air Munitions, DCS/M, arrived in Vientiane to rebuild the gun system, and within a week declared all five gunships had demonstrated a 100 percent fireout. On 4 November, two USAF weapons mechanics were assigned TDY to train personnel and maintain the Spooky's guns. <sup>58/</sup>

At almost the same time, the decision was made to increase the number of RLAF gunships, along with a change in armament configuration. Instead of the SUU-11 system, the eight new AC-47s (to be exchanged on a one-for-one basis with C-47s already possessed by the RLAF) would be armed with the more easily maintained MXU-470A guns. <sup>59/</sup> The swap, while alleviating maintenance and operational difficulties, created a new, fortunately temporary, series of tribulations. <sup>60/</sup> According to an assistant Air Attache, the first and second MTT graduates:

*"had problems because we started training with a borrowed Spooky with the MXU-470 system; then the first birds we received had the SUU-11 guns. So we started training them in the SUU-11, but the birds were all exchanged for the better MXU-470, so for a while we were right back where we started."*



[REDACTED]

The increase from five to eight AC-47s also insured that the hard-pressed MTT program would have to provide additional pilots for the already severely undermanned RLAF AC-47 force. Accordingly, the Ambassador proposed the following: <sup>61/</sup>

*"The original program for C-47 MTT training envisioned the production of sufficient aircrews and IPs to support a fleet of five AC-47 aircraft. Since that time the AC-47 fleet has been increased to eight in number. In addition, operational necessity has precluded the availability of the trained IPs for use in the instructor role and has required their use as operational pilots. With the manning required for the use of 24 C-47 aircraft and eight AC-47 aircraft, the lack of pilots qualified for night and instrument flight conditions will continue to be a problem. We envision the C-47 MTT as the method of alleviating this problem rather than only producing qualified AC-47 crews. In short, all existing and future C-47 crews must receive night, instrument, and some degree of tactical training. When this training is accomplished, the RLAF could then reasonably be expected to simultaneously support the tactical effort as well as a training program. A factor which must also be kept in mind, which is one proved by previous experience, is that of aircraft and crew attrition. We may expect that as C-47 and AC-47 pilots become more experienced they will also become more aggressive. Coupled with the hostile environment in which they operate, combat lessons must be reluctantly expected."*

Two days later, on 12 December, JUSMAG forwarded the request to CINCPAC. <sup>62/</sup>

Despite the early problems, by December the MTT training had, like its counterpart T-28 instruction, produced a Lao AC-47 capability which an Assistant Attache described as "better than we expected." <sup>63/</sup> RLAF Spookies were flying in MR I and MR III by mid-December, and on the night of the 26th, RLAF Spooky 19 assisted Hunter and Pogo ground FAGs in MR

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II. <sup>64/</sup> Although at first hesitant to communicate freely with the USAF Airborne Command Post because of the language difficulty, the RLAF crews soon adapted themselves, and by 28 December, according to an Assistant Director of the Air Battle Staff (DABS), the contact between ALLEYCAT <sup>65/</sup> and the English-speaking pilot of the RLAF Spooky was satisfactory:

RLAF and RLG Operations - 1969

What contributed to the most severe growing pains in the RLAF's history was the extremely variable military and political position of the RLG in 1969. In effect, this year was a microcosm of all the ebbs and flows which the Laotian part of the Indochina war had evidenced in the past. The difference this time was that everything happened much more rapidly and with greater intensity. The "crunch," it seemed, was always on. Despite internal problems within the RLAF itself, the T-28 and, later, the AC-47 pilots extended themselves beyond all reason, often flying in hazardous weather conditions, ever ready to fly another mission, and always pressing. As became obvious, however, some of them pressed too much.

As detailed in previous CHECO reports, the fighting increased in intensity during 1969, as new NVA troops were introduced and as RLAF and USAF strike sorties reached all time highs. By way of comparison, total RLAF FY 68 sorties had been approximately 5,500; FY 69 produced more than 10,000; and FY 70 would see more than 20,000. These figures represented a fourfold increase in just two years. The previous high

[REDACTED]

monthly total of 1,526 sorties, achieved in December 1968, would be surpassed often in 1969.<sup>66/</sup>

Despite this year-end peak, however, in early 1969, the RLG forces were unable to stem a series of NVA/PL advances, in many instances because ground forces would be withdrawn for tactical reasons, even though a site could have been defended, if the FAR and guerrilla troops had been willing to take casualties. With few exceptions, the RLG forces could not afford heavy losses, especially in the lower command ranks. There were just not enough experienced leaders.

Another factor also affected the ground troops' movements--the availability of air support. Ironically, as the number of sorties soared upward, the RLG and guerrilla forces became so dependent upon close air support that when it was not available, they would often abandon positions with little or no resistance to the enemy.

On 3 January, Vang Pao's attempt in MR II to recapture Site 85 (Operation PIGFAT) stalled, and by 7 January, confronted with fresh NVA battalions, his Special Guerrilla Units (SGUs) were in retreat. Never again would a major RLG force penetrate so close to Sam Neua, the capital of the Pathet Lao. Two months later, the much contested Site 36 was abandoned, and the enemy forces committed to these two sites were now free to move farther down into MR II.<sup>67/</sup>

[REDACTED]

At the same time in MR IV, NVN/PL forces were boasting that they would soon capture the Bolovens Plateau and seize Attapeu, then push on to the Thai Border. They tightened the siege of the garrison at Tha Teng, but for the first three months of the year it appeared that the reinforced strongpoint might hold. Politically, Prime Minister Souvanna considered a defense necessary, and to hold off the enemy, USAF aircraft had seeded the approaches with mines and delayed munitions. At one time, RLAf and USAF strikes had accounted for 500 enemy KBA.<sup>68/</sup>

There were problems, however, at Tha Teng. According to the Air Attache, the Ambassador had requested that RLAf helicopter assets alone be used for supply and evacuation of wounded, but the RLAf H-34s found the groundfire too heavy to operate. To relieve the pressure on the fort, it was decided to insert a company of RLG troops on a hill overlooking the besieged position. A rift developed between ARMA and AIRA advisers as to proper helicopter tactics for this operation, with the MR IV Commander, General Phasouk, caught in the middle. When the final decision was made to helilift the troops, along with intense USAF strike support, General Phasouk decided in favor of the AIRA plan and the troops were landed without incident. "But from then on," said the Attache, "relationships were never good between AIRA and ARMA."<sup>69/</sup>

As happened several times in northern Laos, however, an improvement in the friendly situation did not mean an improvement in Lao willingness to fight. Despite later paratroop reinforcements and substantial air

[REDACTED]

support, the 250 Lao defenders deserted the fort at Tha Teng on 4 April. There was no more significant action in MR IV during the year, as the enemy had other plans.

With MR III reporting little enemy activity, attention centered on northern Laos. In MR I, having consolidated his hold on Nam Bac, the enemy pushed against Pakbeng, except for Luang Prabang the last sizable RLG town north of the Mekong. Coupled with the increased Chinese road-building efforts south from their border, the fall of Pakbeng in May caused alarm about possible danger to the royal capital as well. <sup>70/</sup>

In an attempt to counter the growing NVA/PL presence in MR II, the RLG in mid-March had authorized Operation RAINDANCE, a joint USAF/RLAF strike package around the Plaine des Jarres which would be followed by a government advance. From 17-21 March, 261 USAF and 43 RLAF sorties initiated the operation. By 3 April, when USAF F-105s leveled Xieng Khouangville, the RLG position was improving, but still considered critical. Hopes rose slightly when Vang Pao's forces occupied Xieng Khouangville from late April to 24 May, but when the enemy retook the town and started a general move westward from the PDJ toward the Neutralist town of Muong Soui, RLG hopes plummeted. <sup>71/</sup>

During this period of relatively good weather, the RLAF T-28s had been flying more and more sorties. From 28 March to 30 April, for instance, they logged 1,436, and in May set a new record with 1,695. <sup>72/</sup> With 45 aircraft available for combat (nine of which were flown by the Thais) <sup>73/</sup> the

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once desired total of 40 sorties a day had been far surpassed. Contributing to the rise had been Vang Pao's oldest surviving Meo pilot, Capt. Lee Lua, who had flown in April the incredible number of 117 sorties.<sup>74/</sup> True, the sorties from 20A were usually not much longer than 30 minutes; nevertheless, that kind of pace for a fighter pilot cannot last for long.

<sup>75/</sup>  
An Assistant Attache recognized this fact:

*"In March, I think it was, I took Lee Lua aside and told him straight he was flying too much, that he was going to kill himself. He was flying too low, taking blast damage all the time. It was right after he had bailed out and I think I got to him for a while. I told him he was doing things that no pilot should be doing, and I told him I just wanted to say goodbye, right there. But then the Muong Soui push came...."*

<sup>76/</sup>  
On 2 June 1969, the Ambassador assessed the situation:

*"The current waning dry season offensive by the enemy took every bit of energy and all the assets this mission could muster in support of the armed forces of the Royal Lao Government in order to avert a potential disaster. We were required to employ even the advanced attrition T-28 aircraft on hand in order to bolster the government's morale and safeguard its tactical position on the ground. We expect similar severe enemy offensive efforts during the next dry season."*

Unfortunately, the enemy offensive was not waning at all. The wet season was late in arriving, and as RLAF and USAF airstrikes attempted to stop the resupply efforts, it became obvious that the NVA/PL forces would attempt one more move before the rains washed away their lines of communication. On 24 June, they began their attack on Muong Soui. With tanks and

[REDACTED]

artillery, fresh NVA battalions were under orders to "take Muong Soui or die trying." When the Neutralist troops refused to hold positions, Muong Soui fell on 28 June 1969. After the 24th, when 48 USAF and 29 RLAF strikes were flown, the weather had closed in, severely restricting air support.<sup>77/</sup>

At this critical point in 1969, the 19 June graduation of 14 new RLAF pilots including the six Meos, certainly did raise Vang Pao's morale, as the Ambassador had noted. Within a year, five of the Meos would be dead and one would have been severely burned from a bailout after being hit by groundfire. In addition, the new class could hardly have had a worse introduction to combat flying, for on 11 July, Capt. Lee Lua dueled his last 12.7 mm gun. Known alternately as "the Red Baron" or "the Golden Boy," he was "just worn out from flying 10-12 sorties a day," according to the Assistant Air Attache. In his 14 months as a pilot, he had logged at least 800 combat missions and had been secretly decorated by the USAF.<sup>78/</sup> His loss occurred during Vang Pao's unsuccessful attempt (Operation OFF BALANCE) to retake Muong Soui, a drive which was again hindered by Neutralist desertions and extremely poor weather. That same day, another RLAF pilot was shot down, and from 11 July to 11 August, a total of four pilots would be lost.<sup>79/</sup>

Despite the government's deep despair of July, however, RLG forces would embark on two operations, JUNCTION CITY JR. and ABOUT FACE, the latter called by a CAS official "the first major victory in the history

[REDACTED]

of the Royal Lao Government."<sup>80/</sup> In MR II, Vang Pao's guerrillas would move nearly to Ban Ban, and in MR III, with talk of interdicting the Ho Chi Minh Trail, JUNCTION CITY JR. would enter territory which had been occupied by the PL/NVA for the past ten years.

In the latter operation, USAF air provided most of the support. Primarily a CAS-advised SGU operation, JUNCTION CITY JR. had begun as a limited probing offensive, but when little enemy resistance was encountered, the decision was made to push on as far as possible, and the operation was given its nickname. The new offensive was scheduled to start on 1 September and last six days, with hopes that the town of Muong Phine could be secured for a week. Unfortunately, CAS planning was not revealed to USAF until too late to schedule air support for the first day; as a consequence, USAF air did not arrive until 2 September.<sup>81/</sup>

At Savannakhet that week, only 21 T-28 interdiction and combat support sorties were flown by the RLAF, partly because of the ground crew strike, but also because of a failure of either the FAR JOC<sup>82/</sup> or CAS to give the RLAF any targets. In fact, said the AOC Commander:

*"CAS was too busy with JUNCTION CITY to post a representative to JOC during the past week. Thus absolutely no targets have been generated through JOC throughout this period although 3+ battalions of SGU have successfully moved into and secured hundreds of square miles of enemy territory. I feel Operation JUNCTION CITY would have been a much costlier maneuver in both SGU casualties and time to secure if not for the constant presence of USAF-fragged air cover. I also feel that*



[REDACTED]

*without the above stated problems to contend with, MR III T-28s could have provided nearly all the air cover required and at a much, much lower cost in terms of flying time and munitions. Perhaps if this example can be rewritten and presented to the RLAF Commander as an example of the unreliability caused by poor organization and lack of interest within his own command structure, it may generate some interest in AIRA's proposed reorganization plan and at the same time alleviate a local problem here."*

At the same time in Pakse, the situation was different. The AOC Commander said, "The JOC is functioning smoothly now. Both the FAR and SGU, especially the SGU, are providing an adequate number of valid targets to support the increased sortie flow." That week, the six Pakse T-28s (there were 12 at Savannakhet) had logged 70 strike and combat support sorties.<sup>83/</sup>

During the next seven days, Savannakhet sorties picked up to a total of 65, but 58 were flown for interdiction, not close air support. The RLAF H-34s did airlift a battalion of FAR troops into Ban Tang Vai to reinforce JUNCTION CITY JR., a feat which was called "notable" by the AOC Commander because the crews flew on a national holiday.<sup>84/</sup>

On 13 September, Muong Phine was occupied by FAR troops, and other units early in October reached the Route 9/914 junction, quite close to Tchepone itself. The enemy, however, began attacking all along the extended lines of the RLG forces, and by the end of October, the troops of Operation JUNCTION CITY JR. were on their way back.<sup>85/</sup> Although the RLAF T-28s from

[REDACTED]

Savannakhet had provided some assistance, air operations had been conducted primarily by the USAF.

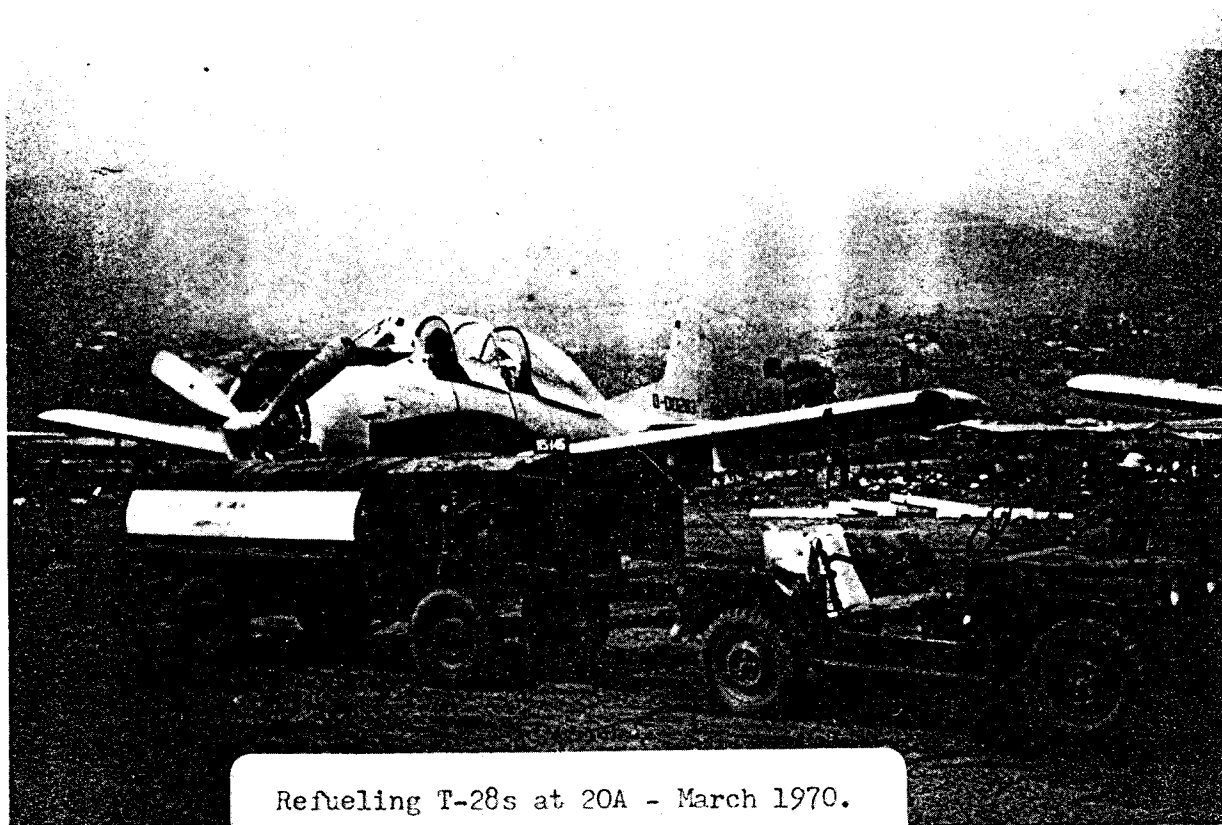
To the north, as Operation ABOUT FACE began to gather momentum after 6 August, USAF air support also vastly exceeded that of the RLAF, in number of sorties as well as tons of ordnance. There was a difference in MR II, however, because the rapport which General Vang Pao had with his Meo pilots caused them to fly more sorties than the pilots in any other Military Region. He also paid his pilots more. In addition, Vang Pao had a unique method of targeting which took two forms: at the daily meeting, usually during or immediately after dinner, he would brief on the next day's operations, then personally instruct not only his O-1 back seat FAC observers but also his pilots. In no other Military Region did the commanding general have such close contact with his air assets. Occasionally, Vang Pao would also bypass the normal system and order an immediate strike. An AOC Commander described such an incident: <sup>86/</sup>

*"VP runs his own show here. He does most of the targeting, sometimes using CAS, sometimes using his own sources which he doesn't tell CAS about. He'll recommend the ordnance and the locations. The other day, we were standing on the flight line and VP came down with a target. It was on the sides of two parallel ridgelines beside a river. He wanted two T-28s to come in along the sides and parallel the ridgetops, dropping half-way up the hills. He did not go through CAS, and the guys on the flight line were the first to know."*

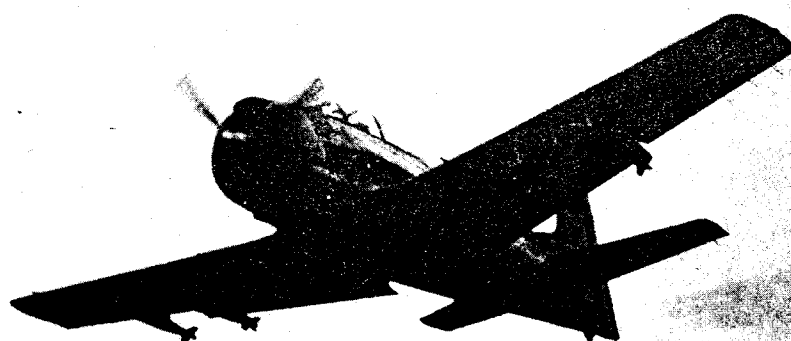
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By way of comparison, the T-28s flying from 20A (and later staging from Vang Pao's forward command post at L-22 in the PDJ) flew 137 and 114 sorties, respectively, during the first two weeks in September, compared to the 21 and 65 already noted at Savannakhet.<sup>87/</sup> Sortie figures alone can be misleading, though, because, due to the terrain surrounding the runway, the T-28s from 20A could not carry the ordnance load that the aircraft from either Savannakhet or Pakse could. Rarely did the T-28s from 20A carry 500-lb. bombs; their armament consisted mainly of 250-lb. bombs, rockets, and 50 caliber guns. A maximum of four 250-lb. bombs could safely be carried. During the remainder of 1969 and into 1970, the pilots from 20A were to fly almost nothing but strict close air support, first to advancing, then to retreating troops.

Time after time, the RLAF T-28s supporting Operation ABOUT FACE would be called upon to work over one of the small hilltop outposts in the hilly terrain of MR II, as they did on 19 and 20 August against Phou Nok Kok, the strategic position overlooking Route 7, a main enemy supply route. As a result, SGUs took the position easily.<sup>88/</sup> With the Raven FACs controlling most of the USAF air, the RLAF aircraft would fly to targets briefed by Vang Pao and work with a ground Forward Air Guide (FAG). It was on such a mission on 4 September that Lt. Vang Sue, soon to be Lee Lua's successor as a legendary pilot, was shot down near Phou Kout Mountain. After six hours, a successful SAR effort retrieved the seriously burned pilot,<sup>89/</sup> and after recuperating in the hospital, Vang Sue began flying once again.

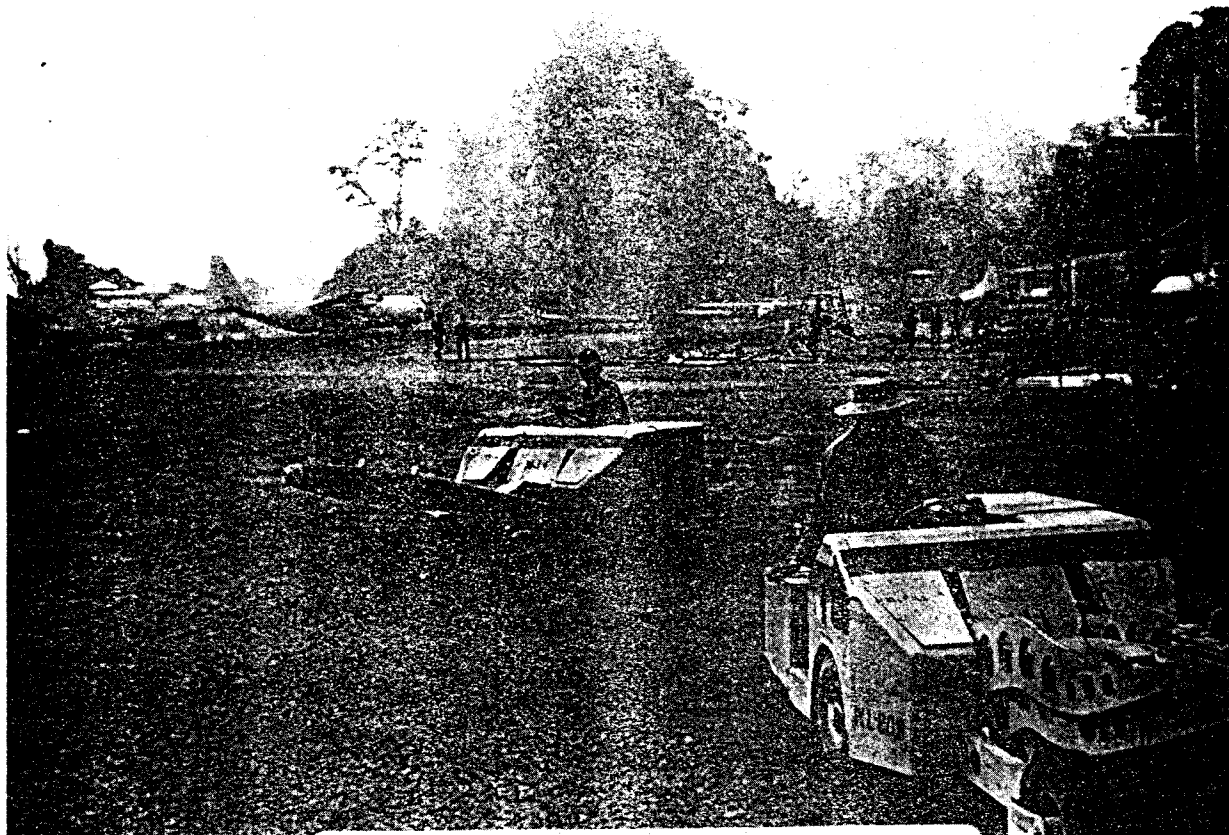


Refueling T-28s at 20A - March 1970.

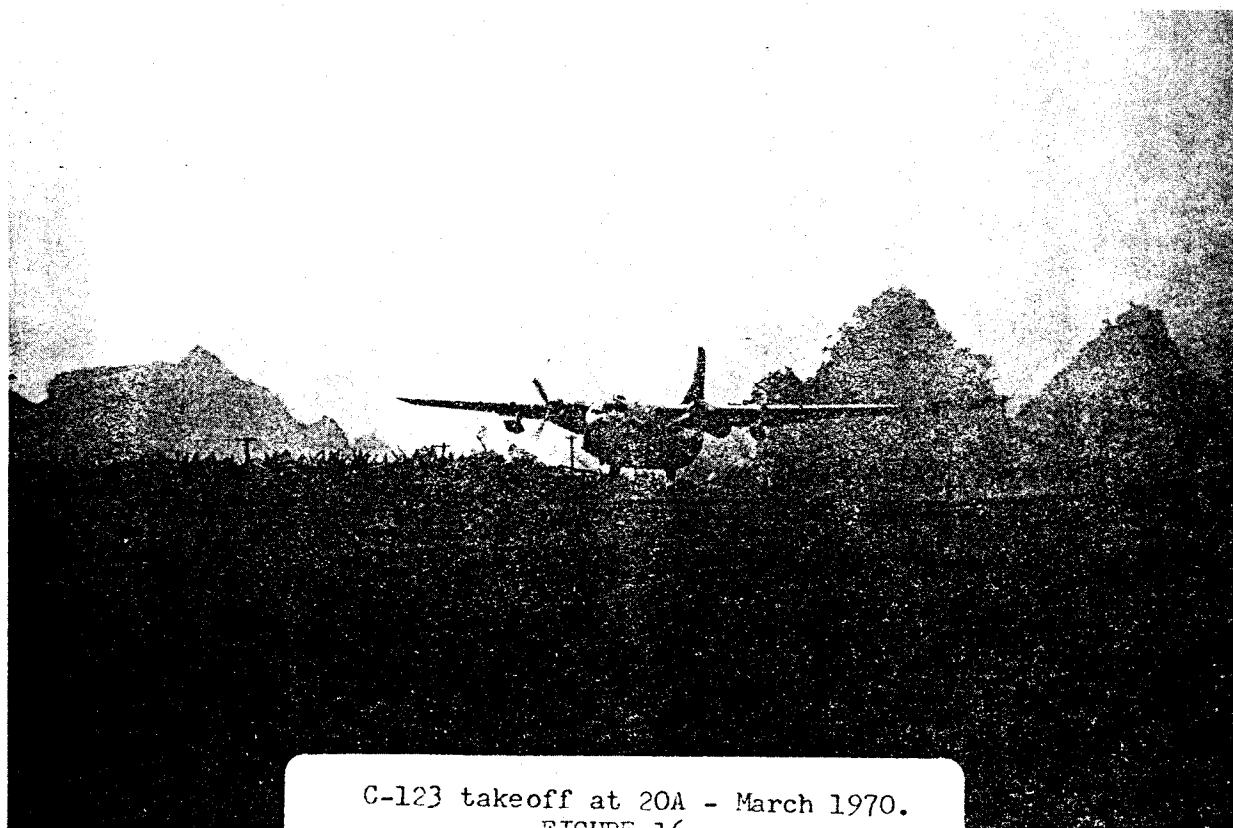


RLAF T-28 takeoff on a mission from  
20A - March 1970.

FIGURE 15



Ordnance brought in C-130 is uploaded  
on RIAP T-28 at 20A - March 1970.



C-123 takeoff at 20A - March 1970.  
FIGURE 16

[REDACTED]

As Operation ABOUT FACE began to exceed anyone's wildest hopes in territory covered and enemy supplies captured or destroyed, sorties for the RLAF continued to climb. For the last two months of the year, the RLAF flew 4,629 sorties, an amount which compared very favorably with the 6,984 produced by the USAF in BARREL ROLL.<sup>90/</sup> From 9-16 November, the average was 85.9 sorties per day for the RLAF, with an operationally ready figure of 27.5 T-28s.<sup>91/</sup>

At year's end, Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma had made an "inspection trip" of the Plaine des Jarres and declared that he would like to see it held. A sapper attack on Lima Site 22, however, on 22 December had signaled the enemy was about to begin his expected drive to regain the territory he had lost. With a phased withdrawal plan drawn up, Vang Pao intended to use his air support to help his SGU and FAR forces conduct, if necessary, an orderly retreat.

Despite the organizational, supply, and maintenance problems, it had been a year of unusual activity for the RLAF. On the surface, it was no nearer unity and self-sufficiency than ever before; nevertheless, as a result of Operation ABOUT FACE, the T-28 pilots throughout the RLAF had for the first time a sense of accomplishment and, even more important, a series of successful air operations to look back upon.

The U.S. Ambassador to Laos, sounding a warning about depleted aircraft stocks and the need for more T-28s, summed up a view held by many at the end of 1969:<sup>92/</sup>

[REDACTED]

"I have been struck with admiration expressed to me by U.S. airmen for the job that the RLAF and its USAF maintenance supporters have performed. One senior competent airman described RLAF action as an incredible air offensive run on a shoe string... The RLAF, from every point of view, is the outstanding success story in Laos."

[REDACTED]

CHAPTER V  
1970 AND BEYOND

As spectacular as the gains of ABOUT FACE had been, they were not to be sustained. When the enemy reacted, he did so with determination. By April, despite heavy losses, the NVA/PL had pushed Vang Pao's Meo and FAR battalions back to the doorstep of Long Tieng itself. In MR I, the steady nibbling process would eliminate all RLG control north and west of the Mekong. Site 209 fell early in the year. In MR IV, reacting to the U.S./SVN thrusts into Cambodia, enemy troops would occupy first Attapeu, then Saravane, and threaten all of southern Laos. By the middle of 1970, the RLG position would appear even worse than it had seemed at the same time in 1969.

The ground reverses, especially those in April, had an unexpected and beneficial effect, not only on the RLAF but on the Lao military as a whole. For a while, ethnic and geographical differences seemed forgotten, as troops from other Military Regions were sent to assist Vang Pao, then T-28s and an AC-47 were shifted to MR IV as General Phasouk's forces came under increasing pressure.

For the RLAF, the first half of 1970 was important not only for the still rising sortie rate but also for the growing indications that the RLAF officers themselves were beginning to look at some of their own problems with an eye toward eventual solution. Certainly, the announced U.S. cutbacks in Southeast Asia and the steadily decreasing USAF sortie



[REDACTED]

rate affected the RLAF outlook, but equally significant was the fact that certain United States trained officers had reached positions of responsibility and, importantly, had been promoted to higher rank. Even so, the ultimate FAR power structure remained unchanged, in fact became even stronger as right-wing factions quietly circulated their discontent with Souvanna's professed neutralism. Nevertheless, by mid-July, with 50 combat-ready pilots, 44 T-28s, and eight operational AC-47s,<sup>1/</sup> the RLAF was more than ever the most effective military force in Laos.

#### RLAF Operations - Jan-Jul 1970

In MR I, the loss of Pak Beng and the solidification of Chinese influence caused a CAS official to reflect later, "We have lost northwest Laos. The CHICOMs are in full control, and all we have left is an intelligence gathering capability."<sup>2/</sup> Even though T-28s from Luang Prabang continued to work area and later river targets, there was little change in the ground situation. It was MR II that received most of the attention in early 1970, as first the strategic summit of Phou Nok Kok fell, then Xieng Khouangville, Lima Site 22, Muong Soui, and many other important sites, with Vang Pao's planned orderly retreat turning into a rout. Only Site 32, north of the PDJ, was not overrun, and airpower was given credit for saving it. Many planned enemy assaults against Site 32 were disrupted during the day by USAF and RLAF strikes; then in the evenings, USAF and, later, RLAF AC-47s successfully held off the enemy.

At first, it appeared that Phou Nok Kok might be held, as nearly continuous air support to determined SGUs accounted for heavy enemy

[REDACTED]

casualties. USAF aircraft provided most of the strikes in and around the PDJ, but when Muong Soui was reactivated on 14 January, RLAF T-28s from Vientiane and 20A used this forward staging base for much quicker turnarounds. Sorties flown there were often no more than 15 to 20 minutes each, and from 14-21 January, as many as 41 sorties were flown from Muong Soui on a single day.<sup>3/</sup> As the length of the sorties decreased, their numbers began to rise. In the next five weeks, until Muong Soui was abandoned on 24 February, T-28s flew 3,350 strike sorties, setting an all-time record from 12-17 February when they flew 920.<sup>4/</sup> With U.S. maintenance and munitions support increasing daily by Air America C-123 shuttle, the RLAF operations from Muong Soui were a high point of an increasingly deteriorating ground situation.

Worsening as well was the weather, as the normal dry season haze resulting from the farmers' slash and burn methods was made denser by additional fires set, some said, by the enemy. With unusually low cloud conditions appearing early in the year, there were only 13 days in January, 14 in February, and 6 in March when ceilings and visibilities consistently remained over 5,000 feet and five miles.<sup>5/</sup> The weather was almost zero-zero when the last strongpoint on Phou Nok Kok finally fell on 14 January, and from then on, the visibility continued poor.

With resistance at Phou Nok Kok gone, the enemy had a clear path to the PDJ. Bringing in trucks, APCs, and tanks, on 20 February, the NVA/PL forces quickly routed the defenders of Lima 22 when air support was not

[REDACTED]

available because the USAF AC-47s had left the station to return for fuel.<sup>6/</sup> Xieng Khouangville was evacuated the next day, Muong Soui was abandoned within a week, and except for a series of sites which came to be called the Vang Pao line, the enemy had a clear shot at the MR II Headquarters of Long Tieng.<sup>7/</sup>

Almost all the attacks had come at night, many when the weather was bad, and the RLAF T-28s and USAF air could not stop the enemy advance. Furthermore, having come to depend on air support around the clock, the ground forces would not hold when the aircraft were not there. As a CAS official noted:<sup>8/</sup>

*"Vang Pao looks upon air as a magic wand. All he has to say is kill the enemy here and it's done. This worked while he was on the offensive. Then they thought the same way of air on the defensive and they expected air to defend them. When it didn't, they got scared and ran."*

With Vang Pao's headquarters being evacuated, the Vang Pao line bypassed, and the enemy apparently massing for an attack, the FAR and SGU troops were going to run no more. Documented in the CHECO Report, "Air Operations in North Laos, 1 Nov 1969 - 1 Apr 1970," dated 5 May 1970, the stand at Long Tieng from 17 March to 1 April should be remembered as the first time the FAR and Meo troops from all Military Regions, in the air and on the ground, achieved a common purpose for a common goal. At first, weather conditions were unbelievably bad, with visibilities of less than a mile common. When USAF air was unable to conduct visual strikes, the RLAF did. During this period, two of the

[REDACTED]

RLAF pilots flying from 20A accomplished 31 sorties in a single day.<sup>9/</sup>  
Shortly afterward, a Lao pilot would fly 19 missions in one day.<sup>10/</sup>

Long Tieng held, due in part to a break in the weather which allowed more air support but also as a result of the determination of all concerned that it would not fall. By mid-April, guerrillas were conducting probes of their own, and while the enemy remained nearby in some strength, now it was the RLG forces who were seeking the NVA/PL instead of the reverse. By the end of July, the situation in MR II had stabilized.

RLAF operations throughout this period took various forms as ground positions changed so rapidly. In mid-April, a fallback staging base at Muong Khasi (LS-249) was readied in an extremely short time, and until the rainy season made the dirt runway unusable, RLAF T-28s flew from there daily. In MR I, attention turned to the Nam Ou River, and with USAF aircraft rarely available because of commitments to MR II, RLAF T-28s concentrated on structures, caves, and boat traffic associated with the enemy's resupply attempts down this waterway. In one week of early April, for instance, T-28s from Luang Prabang collapsed six caves near the Nam Ou and achieved secondary fires and explosions from four others. At night, an RLAF AC-47 worked traffic on the river itself. In MR V, a Spooky supporting friendly forces near Paksane on 8 April broke an enemy mortar attack, accounting for 19 KBA and many wounded. One report stated: "Both FAR Chief of Staff and MR V Commander are enthusiastic about the Spooky quick reaction time and ordnance on target."<sup>11/</sup>

[REDACTED]

Not all the AC-47 missions were as successful, however, and there were problems in scheduling and some conflicting opinions about RLAF versus USAF air support. General Vang Pao for a while would not permit RLAF Spookies to launch, preferring to use USAF AC-47s and AC-119s instead.<sup>12/</sup> It had been a struggle to get the RLAF AC-47s to work Long Tieng in the first place; so AIRA and USAF officers convinced Vang Pao that the RLAF should do more of the job. Then another problem occurred when RLAF AC-47s were asked to divert farther north to Site 32 and other friendly positions.<sup>13/</sup> They simply refused to go. As an Assistant Attache said in May:

*"There are no navigators in the AC-47s. We've trained some, but they just drift away. They find they can make more money in a headquarters outfit...The little lads are afraid at night. If they go down, who's going to pick them up? They have no authenticator information, and no U.S. chopper is going to go in after someone with a foreign accent who just says he wants to be picked up...There are divert problems, too. They don't know the area as well. We don't command them. It's their airplane and their country. We can push them, but we can't command."*

While these and other problems were being worked out, MR IV was heating up rapidly, and the RLAF pilots from Pakse abruptly found themselves in what an MR IV CAS official called a sudden change "from the minor to the major league."<sup>14/</sup> The abandonment of Attapeu marked the first major RLG loss; Saravane would be the next. By the end of July, the enemy would have a foothold on the Bolovens Plateau and be pressing hard in extreme southern Laos.

[REDACTED]

Control of the Bolovens Plateau was vital if RLG forces were to be able to prevent the enemy's unrestricted use of the Se Kong River as a LOC; consequently, most of the efforts of the Pakse squadron were initially in support of ground forces, as the small sites at the eastern edge of the escarpment changed hands frequently. During the third week in May, RLAF T-28s flew <sup>28</sup>167 strike sorties in close air support to friendly troops, <sup>15/</sup> and on the 28th, four RLAF flights forced enemy troops to abandon the positions from which they were mortaring PS-38, a key site. A patrol sweep through the area later counted 10 enemy bodies and numerous blood trails. <sup>16/</sup>

Even though the Air Attache noted at this time that the RLAF was capable of generating 85 sorties a day, <sup>17/</sup> air support alone was not able to prevent the fall of Saravane on 9 June. According to the Attache, "General Phasouk did not have the necessary forces to hold." Moreover, his troops were tired, and "he knew his men would run, because their morale was low...and the reports were that the enemy force was very large." Nevertheless, the general said that Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma wanted Saravane held for political reasons. Possessing a three-day advance notice of the attack, Phasouk could not secure permission for what he called a "planned withdrawal". Consequently, most of his equipment was abandoned when his troops retreated. In the abortive attempts to retake Saravane, there was also some command confusion when General Phasouk, claiming he was ordered to start an offensive with a tired force one-third the size of the enemy's, failed at first to get CAS and ARMA approval for helicopter

[REDACTED]

assistance to insert a company for a blocking force. Finally, a last minute helicopter fleet of mixed RLAF and Air America aircraft did succeed in landing the troops; then, when the counterattack failed, the RLG forces were able to withdraw.<sup>18/</sup>

The day Saravane fell, Raven FACs from Pakse dropped leaflets which announced that the town would be retaken, using mainly bombing by the RLAF." Residents were enjoined to "get away from the enemy." Shortly afterward, extremely accurate bombing by RLAF T-28s demolished only those buildings which were suspected of housing the NVA command post. After the strike, a jubilant squadron commander said that intelligence had reported an NVA general killed.<sup>19/</sup> That week, the 106 sorties flown by the Pakse squadron were credited with having destroyed 51 structures, while damaging only one.<sup>20/</sup>

The Pakse squadron was augmented on 12 June by two additional T-28s and one more AC-47, a result of what the RLAF Commander called "the ability of the COC to function properly."<sup>21/</sup> The Combined Operations Center at Vientiane had formally opened on 26 May, and this TDY shift of aircraft and personnel was another first for the RLAF. As first envisioned, said an Assistant Attache, the COC "was not to be an integrated command post, just a means to know where the airplanes were and to control the transport aircraft, gold, and opium." Now, he added, the COC was "designed to control everything--the T-28s, AC-47s, and C-47s. It's modeled after the DASC-TASC systems in Vietnam."<sup>22/</sup> The RLAF Chief of Operations agreed:<sup>23/</sup>

[REDACTED]

*"The COC is a great help in moving aircraft. Before, we had to go through the JOC only. To move an aircraft, the request would come to the AOC, then to me at operations, and I would have to go into General Sourith and then send the answer back the same way. It took a day. Now we can do it with a radio call."*

By mid-June, as the enemy kept constant pressure on forward RLG sites, the Pakse squadron each month was averaging about 60 sorties<sup>24/</sup> and 40-50 hours of flying time per pilot, according to the squadron commander.<sup>25/</sup> Additionally, the American AOC Commander fervently wished the RLAF possessed a unit citation award (it did not) in recognition of the squadron's achievement in close air support around PS-38.<sup>26/</sup> On 12 June, the squadron formed a ten-ship formation to strike, then to overfly Saravane. Major General La, a member of the FAR General Staff, commented later that evening:<sup>27/</sup>

*"We need U.S. airplanes too to fly over Saravane for a show of force. You understand the show of force. That is what we did this afternoon with the T-28s. They took Saravane so we responded and let them know that we were powerful."*

Unfortunately, the NVA, veterans of much larger shows of force over Hanoi, did not respond as hoped. By the end of July, they were massing on two sides of Khong Island, the site of the Dooley Foundation Hospital and the southernmost RLG bastion in Laos.

If one defines air operations only as the ability to take aircraft and deliver ordnance upon a target and return, then for the first half of 1970, RLAF operations were overwhelmingly successful. For the fiscal year,



[REDACTED]

their sortie rate averaged 530.02 sorties per week, as compared to the USAF BARREL ROLL average of 860.37. For the first week in July, the RLAF started out almost even with the USAF, flying 426 sorties to the USAF's <sup>28/</sup>506.

Another comparison is even more startling. Averaging 36-41 aircraft in commission during a given month, <sup>29/</sup> the RLAF possessed about one-third the resources of their counterpart service, the South Vietnamese Air Force, whose A-1s, F-5s, and A-37s totaled 114. According to the DEPCHIEF, munitions delivered during a three-month period in 1970 compared as follows: <sup>30/</sup>

		<u>GP Bombs</u>	<u>Rockets</u>	<u>CBUs</u>
Feb	VNAF	15,000	8,354	0
	RLAF	11,342	5,471	1,367
Mar	VNAF	14,671	4,689	0
	RLAF	9,641	6,132	780
Apr	VNAF	18,831	13,389	0
	RLAF	9,652	9,652	886

Once again, however, the dedicated and daring pilots of the RLAF, along with their USAF Allies, had succeeded only in hurting and delaying the enemy. They had not stopped him. Operationally, the RLAF had progressed, but the Lao armed forces had definitely not yet succeeded.

#### RLAF Trends - Jan to Jul 1970

As the RLAF increased in size, strength, and capability, the individual bases and composite squadrons began to take on more characteristics

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of their own, a product (as has been noted earlier) of decentralization. Hopefully, a properly operating COC would eventually bring them back together. Within the RLAF, however, there was no real standardization, and the character of a given composite squadron depended more than ever upon three personalities: that of the Military Region Commander, the Base/Wing/Squadron Commander, and the American AOC Commander. By 1970, most of the AOC Commanders were volunteers who had returned for their second or third Southeast Asia tour, and many by then were well experienced with Laotian operations either through AIRA, Project 404, or SOF. As long as these men continued to be available, the consensus was that the RLAF operations would improve.

On the RLAF side, the situation was somewhat different. In 1970, certain commanders were newly assigned; others had been in the same or nearly identical position for years. Some were efficient and motivated; others definitely were not. The Luang Prabang Wing Commander (who also doubled as the Base Commander) was strong, according to the American advisers. "I don't say he's a good leader," said one, "but he makes his men work. When he's not there, they slack off. He isn't afraid to throw them in jail." The Deputy Commander of MR II was General Bounchanh, the man whose Group Mobile force had lost Pakbeng. He had come to respect the need for proper targeting. Accordingly, the targeting procedure in MR I was as follows: <sup>31/</sup>

[REDACTED]

*"Our targeting comes from three references: CAS, FG Northwest and FG East, and MR I HQ. At 1600, CAS, ARMA, and MR I sit down together and discuss the intelligence, plot it on the board, and talk about which are the best targets. ARMA can then request Infrared flights if they're needed. Then the FACs go and VR the area and can either recommend striking or holding off. We always try and send a FAC up if possible. It's paying off. Look at the recent KBA. We're trying to get away from the concept of using TACAIR as artillery ... Now we can throw the whole frag out the window if we want to."*

In MR I, a Raven FAC continued, the enemy was no longer mobile, and the ground situation was very similar to what it had been before Nam Bac fell, but "farther south--to within 25 miles north of Luang Prabang." In mid-1970, the Luang Prabang squadron was striking primarily pre-briefed area targets, and about 25 percent of their sorties were controlled by USAF Raven FACs. "We do work well with CAS at LP," a FAC said, "but that's not to say they tell us everything." The AOC Commander concluded: <sup>32/</sup> "I think Luang Prabang is the only place where everyone gets along."

At Vang Pao's MR II headquarters, however, the situation was quite different. The variable targeting methods which Vang Pao used have been discussed; what differentiated the military situation in MR II from that in MR I was the extreme mobility of Vang Pao's forces, the intense loyalty of his Meo pilots while they were still alive, and Vang Pao's close relationship with CAS. One should remember that it was Vang Pao's troops which CAS first started training and that MR II had traditionally been the scene of the heaviest ground fighting.

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At 20A, according to the AOC Commander, only about one percent of the RLAF sorties were directed by Ravens; the rest were briefed by Vang Pao from CAS, AIRA, and his own intelligence sources.<sup>33/</sup> Consequently, severe questions arose throughout 1970, both from AIRA and USAF commanders in Thailand and Vietnam, as to the accuracy and effectiveness of this extremely personal targeting concept and Vang Pao's use of airpower as artillery. MR II was also the region into which the largest number of USAF strikes were directed--many of them controlled by Raven FACs.

In June, the concept was changing, as an AOC operation similar to those in the other Military Regions was finally agreed upon. According to the Air Attache, the Ambassador had authorized an AIRA representative to go daily to organize the command and control system. The concept was to be:<sup>34/</sup>

*"The AOC Commander will be the focal point. He'll get VP to use the board, and VP will not pull T-28s when he wants to. He'll be like any other military region commander and participate like the others, providing inputs to a JOC. The AOC Commander will run the operation up there."*

"It's a major change in policy," said the AOC Commander. "CAS" is now requesting that an ALO be assigned." He continued:<sup>35/</sup>

*"The concept is new, but maybe the Meo aren't ready yet. We may be bringing them along too fast. Don't forget, it took a long time for the U.S. to develop the concepts we have now, and our standards may be too high. Vang Sue, for instance, wants to fly his own aircraft all the time, the way we used to in WWII and Korea. He doesn't want Yang Xiong to fly*

*his because he says Yang is too hard on his aircraft--but Yang says the same thing about Vang Sue."*

Also mellowing was Vang Pao's attitude toward his pilots. According to the AOC Commander, "VP is changing his thinking a bit. He realizes that his pilots should not fly as much as they do." But Vang Pao would always be reluctant to delegate any more authority than he had to, and the AOC Commander doubted if he would ever release any of his Meos to fly in other Military Regions.<sup>36/</sup>

At Savannakhet, there were similarities to MR I and MR II, with the added ingredient of a Base Commander whom a former AOC Commander had called "operationally illiterate and morally responsive only to his own welfare."<sup>37/</sup> Major Kongsana had been reduced in grade for his part as aircraft commander of the ill-fated smuggling flight to Saigon, but in 1970 he held the same position as he had before. At Savannakhet, according to the AOC Commander, Major Kongsana was not at all subordinate to the Wing Commander, with the result that such friction often occurred that "everybody who's any good always seems to go."<sup>38/</sup>

The Savannakhet T-28s worked "mainly with the [CAS] battalions," said the AOC Commander. "The FAR does very little here, and the RLAF likes to work with [CAS] because they get good BDA." [CAS] did keep the MR III FAR Commander informed, but rarely if ever consulted with him beforehand.<sup>39/</sup> The newly appointed Wing Commander, Lt. Colonel Thongdy, was a C-47 pilot who had flown T-28s on General Ma's staff, while the

[REDACTED]

Squadron Commander of the AC-47 and T-28 squadrons was Captain Chantasone, who in June 1970, was flying T-28 and AC-47 missions simultaneously. In July, he was transferred to Udorn as an instructor pilot with the fourth C-47 MTT.<sup>40/</sup> Targeting was discussed at the daily JOC meeting, but the real control came from CAS, traditionally reluctant to reveal plans until the last minute. In June, concerning a planned operation, the AOC Commander reminded a CAS official, "Be sure and let me tell AIRA in time so we can get some USAF air."<sup>41/</sup>

It was at Pakse that the only field grade current T-28 pilot in the RLAF was also the Wing Commander. Lt. Colonel Khouang, one of the first H-34 students in 1963, had transferred to T-28s to take command at Pakse. After the establishment of the JOC in late 1969, Colonel Khouang had apparently taken firm charge, if we may accept the following comment of the AOC Commander:<sup>42/</sup>

*"Under the leadership of the newly assigned Base Commander, Lt. Col. Khouang, the discipline and military conduct of the entire base has noticeably increased. The morale of the aircrews is high and that of the ground crews is improving. The lethargy and the 'let the Americans do it' attitude has all but disappeared."*

During 1970, this impression persisted. Performing both Base and Wing Commander functions, Colonel Khouang, when asked who controlled the C-47s, replied simply, "I am in command of the C-47s. They work for me."<sup>43/</sup> On 12 June, a written fragmentation order was introduced, as the deteriorating situation required the CAS SGU battalions on the Bolovens

[REDACTED]

and the FAR forces commanded by General Phasouk to work in closer concord. By the end of the month, Raven FACs were controlling most of the RLAF airstrikes. According to the Ravens, the Pakse squadron preferred FAC-directed strikes, and the AOC Commander noted that the RLAF pilots were starting to follow the FACs' instructions much more closely, even dropping their ordnance singly, whereas they had formerly released doubles and often salvoed all ordnance on one pass. <sup>44/</sup>

Although there was a JOC functioning in MR V, variable situations resulted when 20A was evacuated and all MR II Raven FACs, Meo pilots, and Thais, as well as the Vientiane squadron, flew from this base. [Except for the Thais, who conducted most of their strikes in MR V,] no real operational pattern had developed by July. According to the AIRA COC liaison officer, there were joint meetings at the MR V JOC between J-3 (Operations), the T-28 Commander, and CAS, but there was still no real "joint planning for anything," and the RLAF was "just beginning to know its capability." Although CAS at that time did not attend the COC daily briefings, the liaison officer added that the JOC concept was working well in Military Regions I, III, and IV. <sup>45/</sup>

At all the bases, AC-47s were scheduled on alert, and except for MR I, flew against very few pre-briefed targets. By the end of July, two AC-47s had been lost, one from mechanical difficulties, the other apparently from pilot error, as one of the Pakse pilots, attempting to make an automatic direction finder (ADF) approach on 27 June in very poor

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weather, failed to lower his landing gear. Ironically, this was the same crew that survived the first crash in MR V. This time, only one gunner. <sup>46/</sup> lived.

As aircraft were finally being shifted from one military region to another and the COC began to monitor operations by squadrons which functioned independent of and different from each other, a major defect of the RLAF command structure became apparent: The Chief of Operations, Major Concy, a dedicated and capable H-34 pilot, did not have the command authority required to function as he should. In fact, as an AIRA report <sup>47/</sup> said:

*"The RLAF General Staff is capable of making plans and decisions. There are pilots [and other workers] capable of implementing these plans and decisions, yet the RLAF does not have one man that could truly be described as an 'Operations Officer.' This duty must be performed by an American."*

In July, there was one USAF adviser working on a day-to-day basis strictly with RLAF operations. A former assistant air attache had another <sup>48/</sup> idea:

*"What would I suggest? Send an operationally experienced American colonel up there and give him to Sourith. Let him live with him and make all his decisions."*

#### Manpower Survey Results

Even though there were still severe RLAF middle management and command problems, by mid-1970 the effects of the AIRA/RO manpower survey



# RLAF HEADQUARTERS

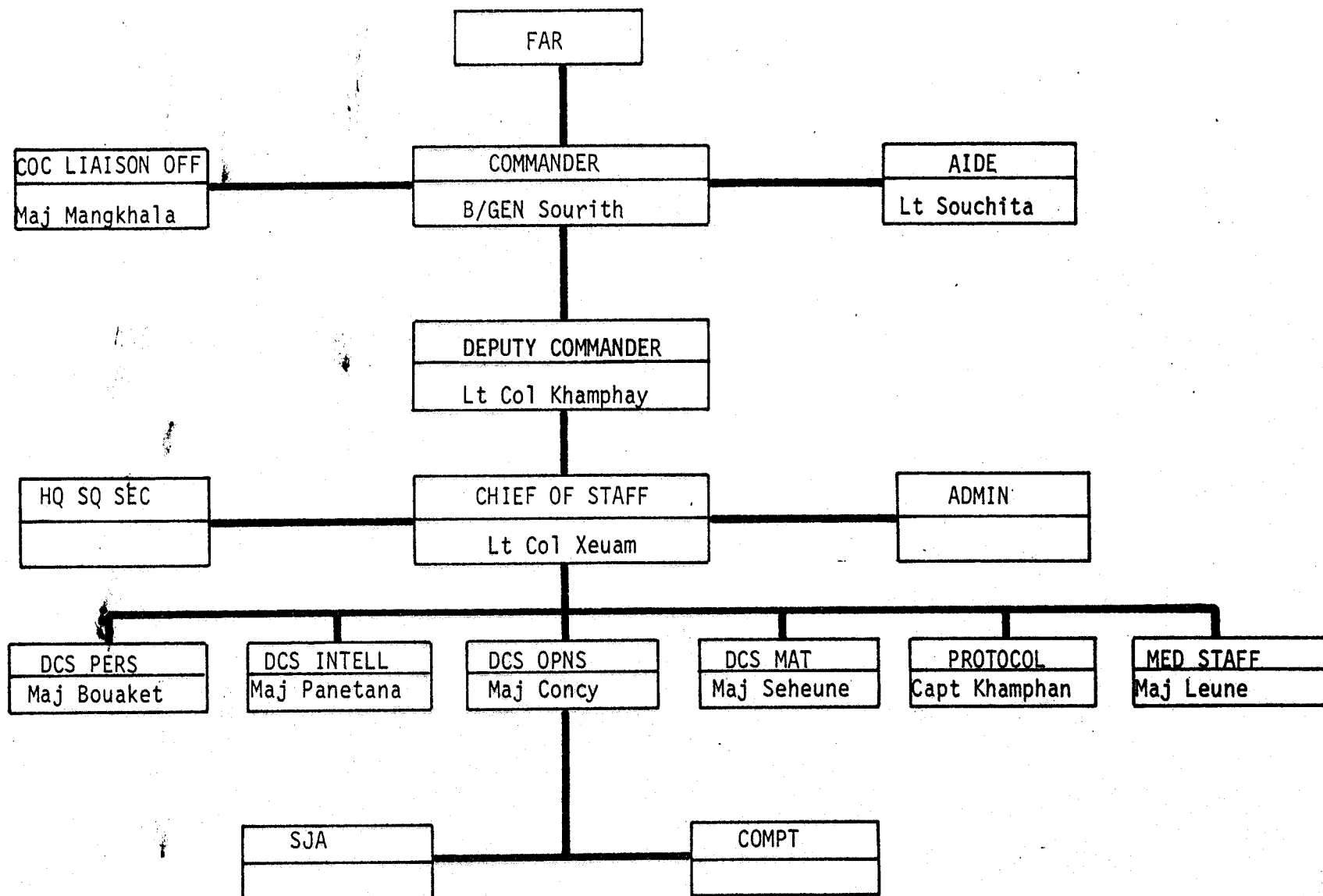


Figure 17

Source: AIRA

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were beginning to be felt. By the end of January, analysis of the RLAF force strength printout showed that in many instances, U.S.-trained Lao personnel were serving in fields alien to their specialty, were scheduled to attend training courses for the second or third time, or in some instances, had simply dropped from sight, even though their commander was still collecting their pay. In the latter instance, Savannakhet showed the greatest discrepancy. According to an assistant attache, General Sourith had expressed an amusing--albeit not especially productive-- attitude toward sending students for U.S. training: "I knew he could pass the course, so I sent him again."<sup>49/</sup>

An AIRA proposal to seriously restrict all training unless the discrepancies were corrected did not have to be implemented. Upon receipt of the training rosters on 16 February, Lt. Colonel Xeuam, the U.S.-trained RLAF Chief of Staff, approved reforms, asked to retain only seven of the 106 RLAF personnel who were currently undergoing training again. These seven were mainly officers who had been previously trained as enlisted men. The other 99 were reassigned to slots in the new UMD, the first ever drawn for the RLAF. This UMD was a direct result of the manpower survey.<sup>50/</sup>

With precise training records and the UMD, U.S. advisers could now monitor the organization and performance of individual RLAF units much more closely. For instance, an RO report in May noted the following discrepancy:<sup>51/</sup>

[REDACTED]

*"AOC Pakse informs me that RO coolies are being utilized to assemble bombs, because the RLAF ordnance personnel do not feel this to be their job and [do feel it] beneath their dignity. In pursuing this problem, I have asked...for a count of trained RLAF ordnance personnel at Pakse. Mr. Thomason informs me there are at least 12 trained ordnance men at each base; therefore, I'll discuss this problem with our ordnance [people] in RO and see if they can come up with the solution."*

By June, another trend was beginning. Although previous years' promotions had been strictly controlled by the FAR, with the RLAF getting very few, the new procedure called for consideration of each service separately. According to the Chief of Operations, "This year, promotions have been given with the UMD in mind--to fill the slots needed." He acknowledged, however, that "the important families have played a large part in RLAF promotions. I do not know whether this is going to change or not."<sup>52/</sup> Major Concy's brother, Lt. Colonel T. Xeuam Phimpavong, was currently the RLAF Chief of Staff.

#### USAF Training

The graduation on 6 March 1970 of 16 new pilots from WATERPUMP swelled the RLAF T-28 pilot strength to 53, the highest it had ever been at one time. Flying a total of 130 combat missions with their instructor pilots, these students had received the most intensive training yet. They operated under Nail FAC control and bombed in an area about 60 miles north of Nakhon Phanom, receiving credit for the destruction of numerous bunkers and the cratering of some roads.<sup>53/</sup> The class in training,

[REDACTED]

70-02, had only 12 students, primarily because of stricter requirements for English language proficiency. Seven more Meo pilots had been attending English training at Phone Keng, but their attendance record had been poor. Only two of the Meos had been present for more than 60 percent of the scheduled class time,<sup>54/</sup> and when 70-02 began flight instruction on 23 April, five of the Meos would remain in language school for further schooling. In June, a [CAS-sponsored] Meo major with more than 1,000 hours of flying time, according to an Assistant Attache, was entered midway through the course, and his instructors noted that he was doing very well.<sup>55/</sup>

The C-47 MTT was having some student problems too, but, unlike the T-28 course, there was no problem with language. By the end of July, the Udorn-based MTT had three working Lao instructor pilots assigned, one of whom was handling all the academic training. A request had even been made to send two USAF IPs home. The C-47 problem concerned the experience level of student pilots. Originally designed as an upgrading program, the fourth MTT found itself forced to construct a basic undergraduate pilot training course; for some students possessed as little as 11 hours in Savannakhet O-1s.<sup>56/</sup> As an assistant air attache testified, "They were all we could find to send."<sup>57/</sup> Accordingly, the course was lengthened to include more basic instruction, and, halfway through, the instructors were satisfied with their students' progress. Also being trained were ten Lao maintenance instructors, as well as senior supply and armament NCOs.<sup>58/</sup>

In June, a new experiment attempted to bolster what were thought to be sagging RLAF AC-47 operations. A five-man team of three USAF

[REDACTED]

navigators and two pilots who had been flying with the terminated USAF AC-47 program were sent TDY to AIRA, Vientiane, to standardize, instruct, and assist the Lao crews. As mentioned earlier, the RLAF was short of navigators; as a result, no RLAF AC-47 carried a navigator on board. An impromptu navigation school was set up at Vientiane, and the USAF AC-47 crew-members toured the RLAF bases, assisting where they could. At the end of July, AIRA was requesting extensions, as well as the assignment of a full-time senior officer with staff and AC-47 experience.<sup>59/</sup> As a former assistant attache had said, "One of the major problems is that there's no H-34 man assigned as an adviser; neither is there anyone strictly for the C-47s. All the emphasis has been on the T-28s."<sup>60/</sup>

In all, from FY 65 to FY 69, there had been approximately 139 RLAF pilots trained by third country programs, with an additional 56 in training during FY 70.<sup>61/</sup> In March, the RLAF listed 147 pilots on its rolls, but as an assistant attache commented:<sup>62/</sup>

*"In the last ten months, the RLAF has lost 26 T-28 aircraft and 16 T-28 pilots in combat. It is somewhat ironic to note that this month precisely 16 new pilots were graduated from T-28 flying training, and this week will be engaged in combat operations."*

Phrasing the problem in different words, a former assistant attache said, "Yes, it's always seemed true--the attrition equals the inputs. When I came, the RLAF had 31 pilots, and when I left, I think they had 32."<sup>63/</sup> The "fly until they die" motto of the RLAF T-28 pilots certainly had its roots in fact.

### In-Country RLAF Advice and Training

As for the RLAF at home, in mid-1970 many of the USAF personnel in advisory and instructor positions looked back with more than mild chagrin. "What we should have done," said an AC-47 instructor pilot, "was to let the first Lao MTT students fly with the USAF Spookies."<sup>64/</sup> A maintenance officer concurred: "The RLAF has absolutely no advisory maintenance capacity. We could have given it to them, if it weren't for the operational commitment."<sup>65/</sup> In-country, two AOC Commanders found fault with the policy which did not permit them legally to fly combat missions with the RLAF. As one saw it:<sup>66/</sup>

*"The AOC Commander should be allowed to fly, if for no other reason than to check tactics and delivery techniques--to monitor procedures and continuing proficiency. Their dive angles tend to shallow out and their airspeeds go to hell. They drop too low, too. Someone should continue to check their proficiency."*

The second corroborated this feeling of frustration:<sup>67/</sup>

*"The AOC Commander is hamstrung in the one area in which he is best qualified and most able to influence the development of the RLAF pilots...I do not advocate that the Commander be placed on the daily mission schedule but that he be given the prerogative of flying those missions he deems necessary, without placing himself in the position of violating a direct order."*

Summing up one part of the continuing problem, another AOC Commander said, "The SOF people assigned to an AOC just don't have enough time to instruct the Lao. We're too busy doing our job."<sup>68/</sup> An assistant attache agreed:<sup>69/</sup>

[REDACTED]

*"As far as the Air Force is concerned, there is very little training going on at the local level. The AOC Commander acts like a base commander, but the U.S. personnel are usually too busy loading bombs and fixing airplanes to do any training. The augmentees do not advise--they work. The regular attaches do have an advisory function, but at the staff, not at the working level."*

Finding that the in-country "training advisory effort was marginal,"  
the DEPCHIEF was encouraged by the U.S. Embassy response to criticism: <sup>70/</sup>

*"AIRA has long been aware of deficiencies in all phases of the RLAF in-country training program. These deficiencies are mainly due to poor supervision and lack of adequate personnel management. To resolve this problem, AIRA and RO/USAID are collaborating in an effort approved by the Ambassador, to acquire a civilian training coordinator whose primary duty would be to monitor the expanding RLAF in-country training programs including flight associated programs."*

Because of the operations-directed orientation of the in-country programs, USAF augmentees had been unable to increase the capability of the RLAF to supervise itself. To create a greater self-sufficiency in case of a U.S. scaledown of efforts, an assistant air attache said simply, "We'll need more people." <sup>71/</sup>

#### The RLAF in 1970--Problems and Prospects

After many years of continuously increasing U.S. financial and advisory support, the lack of command and middle management ability still prevented the RLAF from being able to take care of itself. One USAF colonel, formerly attached first to AIRA and then to the DO of 7AF/13AF at Udorn, commented: <sup>72/</sup>

[REDACTED]

*"As far as the future of the RLAF goes, if you were to close WATERPUMP and cancel Contract 0028, the RLAF would just stop being. They cannot do it themselves. Don't forget, we've got more than 1,000 Americans working for the RLAF."*

An acting RO Chief who had been associated with Laos affairs for <sup>73/</sup> nine years added perspective:

*"After the accords of 1962, the RLAF did start doing things for themselves, like supplying rice. Now it's all a U.S. effort, primarily T-28s. For self-sufficiency, the USAF and RO effort now is too much. We're not letting the RLAF do enough. An example: two years ago the C-47s carried more passengers and cargo in support of the FAR than they did last year."*

Two years earlier, it must be noted in fairness to the Laotians, there had been many more airfields available for use by RLAF aircraft.

#### Operations and Aircraft

In hopes of better RLAF capability, proposals were in being for a further authorized strength increase to 112 T-28s. <sup>74/</sup> The 1970 DEPCHIEF Five-Year Plan called for six T-41s to be added for training, with 27 T-28s per year to be supplied to maintain a five-squadron air force with 72 aircraft, increasing to 86 by FY-75. <sup>75/</sup> Without a drastic change in RLAF procedures and ability, however, more aircraft would require more Americans to supervise their operations, maintenance, and supply.

Consideration was also being given to a follow-on aircraft for the RLAF. Of course, the pilots wanted one. The RLAF Chief of Operations



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had heard a rumor that there were 200 WW II Corsairs available. "We would like to fly them," he said, "because they carry more than a T-28. I would also like to fly the A-37--or any jet."<sup>76/</sup> Although AIRA was investigating a twin-engine Volpar turboprop modification to the T-28, the general consensus, as expressed by the Pakse Commander, was that the T-28s were the best possible aircraft for the foreseeable future. "Of course I would like to fly a more advanced airplane," said Lt. Colonel Khouang, "but..."<sup>77/</sup>

The drawbacks to the introduction of a new weapons system were many. As one AOC Commander shrewdly analyzed the problem of new aircraft, "Where the problem will lie is with support, not pilots. These guys can be taught to fly anything, but you'd have to start another WATERPUMP all over again. And I can't see the tactical advantage."<sup>78/</sup> An assistant attache agreed:<sup>79/</sup>

*"As far as new aircraft go, only an out-country MTT could handle it. It could not be done in-country, simply because of facilities and ramp space. For supply and support, the U.S. role would have to continue as it is at present. The Lao have no capability of their own. Considering a replacement aircraft, the big problem is--what kind? The choices seem to be either a modified aircraft or maybe the OV-10. Otherwise, they'd have to go to jets like the A-37 or F-5. They could learn to fly them, but they could never maintain them. Furthermore, Vientiane has the only runway they could operate from, and think of the foreign object damage problem."*

The WATERPUMP Director of Maintenance, even more deeply opposed, did not bother with alternatives or explanations. He said, quite simply,

*[REDACTED]*  
"No new aircraft for the RLAF."<sup>80/</sup>

### Maintenance

Considering the RLAF maintenance capability at mid-1970, an AOC Commander stated that the RLAF now needed "technical, rather than tactical assistance."<sup>81/</sup> Even the USAF mechanics would have trouble with Form 781 write-ups such as these recorded at WATERPUMP:

*"Me speak Radio--Radio no speak back.*

*"Engine all the time go fast, go slow, same-same power setting. Last time this happen airplane crash and pilot killed. You fix very soon please."*

Most U.S. maintenance people agreed that the Lao could perform basic maintenance, but the problem lay in their ability to diagnose and prevent mechanical problems. In the words of an RLAF pilot, "Our problems with maintenance are not with the taking apart and putting together again, but with the trouble shooting--finding out what is wrong."<sup>82/</sup> An RO Maintenance Adviser put it another way:<sup>83/</sup>

*"There is a maintenance time factor with the Lao. What would take an hour for a USAF technician takes the Lao three or four days. They tend to solve problems by going from the difficult to the easy way. For instance, if an aircraft has a mag drop, the first thing they'll do is take off the magneto and take it apart."*

An AOC Commander added another dimension:<sup>84/</sup>

*"As for maintenance, the RLAF is all right, by Lao standards. They don't know anything about*

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*preventive maintenance. For them, the time to change a brake is when the aircraft comes skidding sideways down the runway...One day I saw a pilot about to taxi and I went over and looked at his aircraft. The tires were almost flat. I had an air compressor brought out and the crew chief filled up the tires until they 'looked good.' I made him go back and get a tire gauge. They usually don't care whether a tire has 55 pounds in it or not. I've checked some out at 90 pounds."*

The already mentioned Lao dependence upon the Americans and Udorn was succinctly demonstrated on 12 June, when the RLAF Pakse Commander noted the problems with the MJ-1 bombloader, adding that the crews were often forced to load their bombs by hand.<sup>85/</sup> Later, the AOC Commander explained why:<sup>86/</sup>

*"They just don't maintain them. When one breaks down, they say 'Send to Udorn and get another one.' When this happens, what I've done is order a hand loader instead. Maybe this will work."*

The WATERPUMP DM summed up the RLAF maintenance capability at mid-<sup>87/</sup> year:

*"What they need is discipline and the ability to hold the people they've got. If so, they could provide minimum maintenance for the T-28s. If all U.S. personnel were to be pulled out of Laos, they could keep the aircraft going for 100 hours until it was time for Udorn, but from a service station standpoint only."*

#### Supply and Support

After the U.S. position toward RLAF self-sufficiency was clarified in 1969 with the movement of the depot from Savannakhet to Vientiane, the

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RLAF developed little further capability in supply and support. The prevailing in-country attitude by both USAF and RLAF personnel was summarized by an AIRA report: "Since all materials are supplied by the U.S., very seldom does the RLAF want for anything...In short, the U.S. can provide more than the RLAF is capable of expending."<sup>88/</sup> Prior to mid-1970, this impression was correct, but, as the U.S. commitments to Southeast Asia began to diminish in 1970, there were indications that the concept of an unlimited budget was a thing of the past.

Concerning munitions, for instance, a DEPCHIEF survey found that under programmed funding, if combat operations continued at their present level, "early in calendar year 1971 we will start running out of some items, and be completely out by March."<sup>89/</sup> Specifically, according to the acting RO Chief in June, "If the RLAF goes at the rate of 3,000 sorties a month, they'll be completely out of 250-lb. bombs by the first of the year."<sup>90/</sup> Consequently, DEPCHIEF was proposing that an allocation committee be formed from members of DEPCHIEF, RO, ARMA, AIRA, and the Laotian armed forces, in an attempt to effect better allocation methods.<sup>91/</sup>

Once in-country, supply was also a problem, mainly because of the differing needs of the scattered bases and the variety of methods needed to supply them. Luang Prabang, for instance, received most of its supply by air, as did 20A and the forward operating locations and Lima Sites. Only Savannakhet and Vientiane were considered secure for ground transportation. An RLAF supply network was established on paper, and at

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mid-year there was hope that an RLAF senior officer recently returned from CONUS supply training could improve matters, but, generally, the system was cumbersome. Moving the main depot to Vientiane had reduced losses from theft, but delivery problems remained acute. A Luang Prabang AOC Commander had this to say about the situation: <sup>92/</sup>

*"The supply system is lousy. For instance, if I want a generator at LP, the AOC goes to RO. RO says that if it's for an RLAF resource, to go through the RLAF supply channels, but they aren't any good. Once I ordered an O-1 carburetor and got one for the T-28. The little guy in Vientiane went to the O-1 carburetor bin, but someone had put a T-28 carburetor in the box and he didn't know the difference."*

Asked for a suggested solution to the problems, the same commander replied:

*"Yes, I have a suggestion: Do away with RO completely and make it a military operation. Let the military have jurisdiction over the logistics and supply. There are two reasons--first, RO can't get the right people to do the job, and second, they can't control the theft. I think the military, [in or out of uniform] could."*

According to the AIRA/RO manpower survey, there had been seven officers and 61 enlisted men who had been trained and were still active in supply, almost enough to support a minimum effort for the present RLAF strength of 1,915 men. A Requirements Office representative and an MIT instructor pilot agreed that a major problem occurred when the trained airman crossed the Mekong. Said the former: <sup>93/</sup>

*"It's not that the Lao can't do it, with proper supervision. They're good at Udorn; but when they get across the river, all their knowledge seems to get left in the Mekong, and they revert to where they were before they left."*

The MTT instructor added, in much the same vein:

*"Here, the Lao are aggressive. I think they're better than the Vietnamese--but once they get across that river...For instance, we have a Lao supply NCO who just took the 7-level test. He got damn near a 100%, better than many Americans."*

Although the manpower survey had shown only 68 RLAF personnel active in supply, DEPCHIEF records indicated that as of the end of FY 69, 112<sup>94/</sup> supply personnel had been trained in third country courses alone. Apparently, 40 percent of them had simply drifted away.

#### Personnel and Training

To bring the RLAF up to strength would take about five more years, AIRA estimated. With nearly all of the UMD slots being for technical positions, proper training and assignment were difficult in a land which had the lowest literacy rate in Southeast Asia. Encouraging, however, were recent recruiting results. In March, for instance, of 196 men enlisted, 85 percent were found capable of being taught the English language.<sup>95/</sup> In July, the Director of the Savannakhet English Language School stated that 97 of these recruits would qualify for CONUS training. "They are motivated," he said, "but teaching them anything is difficult, when you have to start completely from scratch. They've never used a bathroom, for instance, or worn shoes."<sup>96/</sup>

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RLAF officers themselves wanted to increase their own training capability as well. The Chief of Operations and the Commander of the Savannakhet Training School said RLAF instructors for flying training programs existed. The problem now was one of materiel: <sup>97/</sup>

*"With six IPs we could run a basic flying school at Savannakhet. We have two IPs at Udorn and two more training in the States. If we could get the airplanes, we could start a school soon—give them the basic flying and then let Udorn teach gunnery. We could do it much easier and quicker than the Americans. Savannakhet is secure. There would be no problem."*

*"The same goes for the H-34. We have three H-34 IPs but no airplanes for Savannakhet. We have asked for them."*

In Bangkok, the Chief of the Air Force Division of DEPCHIEF agreed in part: "Regarding the H-34s, we could turn that right now into an all-Lao operation, but we have received no requests to do so." <sup>98/</sup>

The RLAF School Commander believed that even gunnery could be taught at Savannakhet and that landings could be practiced at nearby Seno, where there was a good runway. He also understood the need for an RLAF FAC capability: "We have no FAC IPs, and we need them. I have asked General Sourith." He also recognized some basic problems: those of hangar and ramp space, runway conditions, lack of a taxiway, and inadequate housing for students and instructors. <sup>99/</sup> Unless these matters were taken care of, a full-scale flying school at Savannakhet remained an impossibility.

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An AOC Commander suggested that one way to resolve the RLAF middle management training dilemma would be to send more NCOs to Udorn to work with the USAF support people at advanced levels. Generally, only basic skills had been taught.<sup>100/</sup> An MIT instructor agreed: "They should send more down here and let them work in the docks. That's where they get the best experience."<sup>101/</sup> The WATERPUMP DM had a more drastic suggestion:<sup>102/</sup>

*"It all depends upon what the U.S. wants to do. To support a fleet of 100 aircraft, they'll need about 600 trained people, including overhead. It could be done in a year, if it was possible to send them to the States for a complete nine-month course."*

Hopefully, once the planned position of in-country Training Coordinator was filled, the RLAF personnel and training situation would improve.

#### Corruption in RLAF

No study such as this would be complete without attention to one of the largest problems which constantly undermined the U.S. attempts to improve the condition of the RLAF. With what AIRA admitted to be "dismally low pay and allowances"<sup>103/</sup> (App. I), officers in the Lao military found it difficult, if not impossible, to resist the temptation to participate in the illegal activities in which practically every level of Laotian society was involved. As the Chief of Operations attested:<sup>104/</sup>

*"I receive 40,000 Kip per month [\\$80.00 U.S.], and a sack of rice now costs 5,000 Kip at the market. It is not easy to live on that. When I see that someone has taken a load of opium, it is very bad for my morale. I am very sad for many days, especially when I think of the money they get and the money I am*



*getting. It is very difficult. As for the morality, I do not think it should be done."*

This attitude was typical of many RLAF pilots. An AOC Commander  
105/  
commented:

*"The RLAF pilots say they don't want to smuggle opium, but they have to. It's opium that's building their new chow hall. Once, the Lao came to the Americans with a logical proposition. When the trucking companies increased their prices so much to haul gas up here, the RLAF said they could use their airplanes and haul the gas for much less. The U.S. said no, that doing so 'would be unfair to private industry.' So now the U.S. pays more to have the gas hauled and the RLAF doesn't get anything."*

Although smuggling opium and gold was the method used mainly by high-ranking officers, the continued acceptance of this practice no doubt implied tacit condonation of the outright theft which was also prevalent. Both smuggling and theft definitely affected RLAF operational capability.

For years, U.S. personnel had confronted and at times circumvented the problem of corruption in the RLAF. As mentioned earlier, the 5 March 1968 meeting had sought "to eliminate some of the more galling and obvious abuses in the FAR."<sup>106/</sup> What occurred during the next few years was that many of the "abuses" went underground. In early 1969, AIRA com-  
107/  
mented as follows:

*"Although General Sourith would like to feel he is powerful enough, strong enough, and enough of a leader to remove 'the Oudones' and stop corruption, that is not the case. Although I feel he does not*

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realize it, he is still just a pawn of the top military leaders. He remains the Commander of the RLAF at their pleasure and only because he does not present a problem or obstacle to those that desire to use military aircraft to further their own personal gains. If and when he becomes more than that, he will likely be removed very quickly."

Far from having been dismissed from the RLAF, Colonel (later General) Oudone had been moved to the FAR G-3 Section, where, AIRA explained, he was to work with the COC. Commenting on this politically-motivated transfer, one report suggested that "in this capacity, he might be able to be used better than in his former position."<sup>108/</sup>

Serving as the unofficial hub of all smuggling activities was Savannakhet, where the 1968 Base Commander, Lt. Colonel Outama, was described as "a ringleader of illegal activities and...important to those involved in corruption."<sup>109/</sup> A plane load of opium, such as the one flown from Savannakhet to Saigon, might net crew-members as much as 6,000,000 Kip (\$12,000 U.S.) per person.<sup>110/</sup>

In early 1969, noting that the Pakse Base Commander was believed to be deeply involved in opium and gold smuggling to Cambodia, an AIRA report summed up the frustration felt by all Americans:<sup>111/</sup>

*"It is discouraging to see corruption running rampant, to see U.S.-furnished aircraft and supplies involved, and to witness individuals that appear more concerned with personal gains than supporting their country in its war efforts... For Americans to step in...appears to be an impossibility. If AIRA personnel, particularly*

[REDACTED]

augmentees [in-country illegally] were to become involved, it would probably mean sudden death."

By 1970, there were indications that some of the activity had shifted from RLAF to private aircraft owned by some high-ranking officers, but, as of May, RLAF assets were still definitely being used. Regarding the defense of Site 32, a [CAS] official commented that one of the reasons it had held so long was that "the poppies aren't harvested yet."<sup>112/</sup> As confirmation of his suspicions, on 30 May there were calls from the site itself for additional RLAF helicopters to carry out the "food."<sup>113/</sup>

The continuing existence of smuggling activities caused different opinions to emerge concerning participation of the RLAF Commander, General Sourith. The air attache considered him honest:<sup>114/</sup>

*"I think Sourith is straight. I can ask him how much money he has and he'll tell me. He uses the money Ouane gives him for the RLAF, putting it in a fund he calls 'the pot.' Ouane does pay him for the use of his transport aircraft. Sourith is a realist--he knows that if he doesn't do this, Ouane will deal directly with his people. This way, Sourith maintains control."*

Others, however, had reservations, and there was very definitely no one with command responsibility in the RLAF who showed signs of emulating General Ma's resistance to corrupt practices. The RLAF Chief of Operations might say, "I think the traffic in opium is much less this year than before," and that "because there is no more gold allowed into Saigon, there has been no gold carried this year,"<sup>115/</sup> but there was still enough illicit traffic to reward a few people handsomely.

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116/  
According to the air attache:

*"General Ma told me that he had personal knowledge that two separate shipments of U.S. travelers' checks of one million dollars each were made to Swiss banks on the 25th and 26th of June from Vientiane. He also saw loads of Kip at Nong Kai which were payment for U.S. arms given to Laos and sold into Thailand."*

A Requirements Officer acting chief summed up the state of illicit activities in mid-1970, commenting in the process on an interesting aspect of RLAF self-sufficiency: 117/

*"You talk about the RLAF not being able to do or organize anything by themselves--look at their smuggling operations. That's something they do very well indeed."*

#### Theft

In addition to many instances of vanishing supplies, which in great part caused the removal of the main RLAF depot from Savannakhet to Vientiane, there were repeated instances of theft at the various bases. In 1968, for instance, AIRA listed some examples: 118/

*"Stealing gasoline from ground-powered equipment, stealing .50 caliber ammunition from the bomb dumps, so that the brass can be sold, and breaking into the AOC buildings themselves and taking office equipment, hand weapons, etc. These incidents have resulted in both loss of operational capabilities and great financial losses."*

Further instances kept occurring. At Vientiane, the following happened later in the year: 119/

"Our gasoline for the tugs, forklifts, and bomb lifts is being stolen. At the present time, more is being stolen than is being used. We have presented this problem to the RLAF Base Commander and he increased the guards. Now the guards are either stealing it or giving it away to friends. The man that operates the pumps was told to take the license number of vehicles that get gas, but when this list is presented to the RLAF Base Commander and he sees the names he says never mind."

After electrical power leads for an APU were cut off and stolen at Vientiane in August 1969, security measures were tightened for the rest of the year. <sup>120/</sup> Thefts still continued, however. An example occurred at Pakse in 1970, when platinum-tipped spark plugs were stolen out of parked T-28s and replaced with the wrong type. <sup>121/</sup> In July, the Savannakhet RLAF Squadron Commander stated that he did not dare load the guns of his T-28s at night because the bullets would be stolen for the brass shell-cases. "It is the Base Commander's job to take care of security," he said with a wry smile. <sup>122/</sup>

Generally speaking, thievery was still a definite problem in mid-1970, its existence and toleration a direct result of the corruption at higher levels. At Savannakhet, for example, communications lines were being buried because the above-ground wires had been stolen. <sup>123/</sup> The Americans, working as hard as they could to protect the U.S. equipment, nevertheless evidenced the same attitude toward Lao corruption as a whole as they had before. In 1968, AIRA had defined the reluctantly-accepted U.S. position: "In order to maintain any semblance of a working

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relationship with the locals, in most instances the Americans must turn their heads and let the practices continue."<sup>124/</sup> Hopefully, the personnel reorganization and the emergence of strong Composite Squadron Commanders would begin to solve this problem. The policy of the air attache continued to be: "Do not interfere, but report all instances."<sup>125/</sup>

RLAF "Supplemental Pay"

The 1969 issuance of combat ration pay to the aircrews was a step in the right direction, but there were other ways by which the pilots and crews could supplement their meager official pay. At Luang Prabang, for instance, in 1968, an AOC Commander reported the following:<sup>126/</sup>

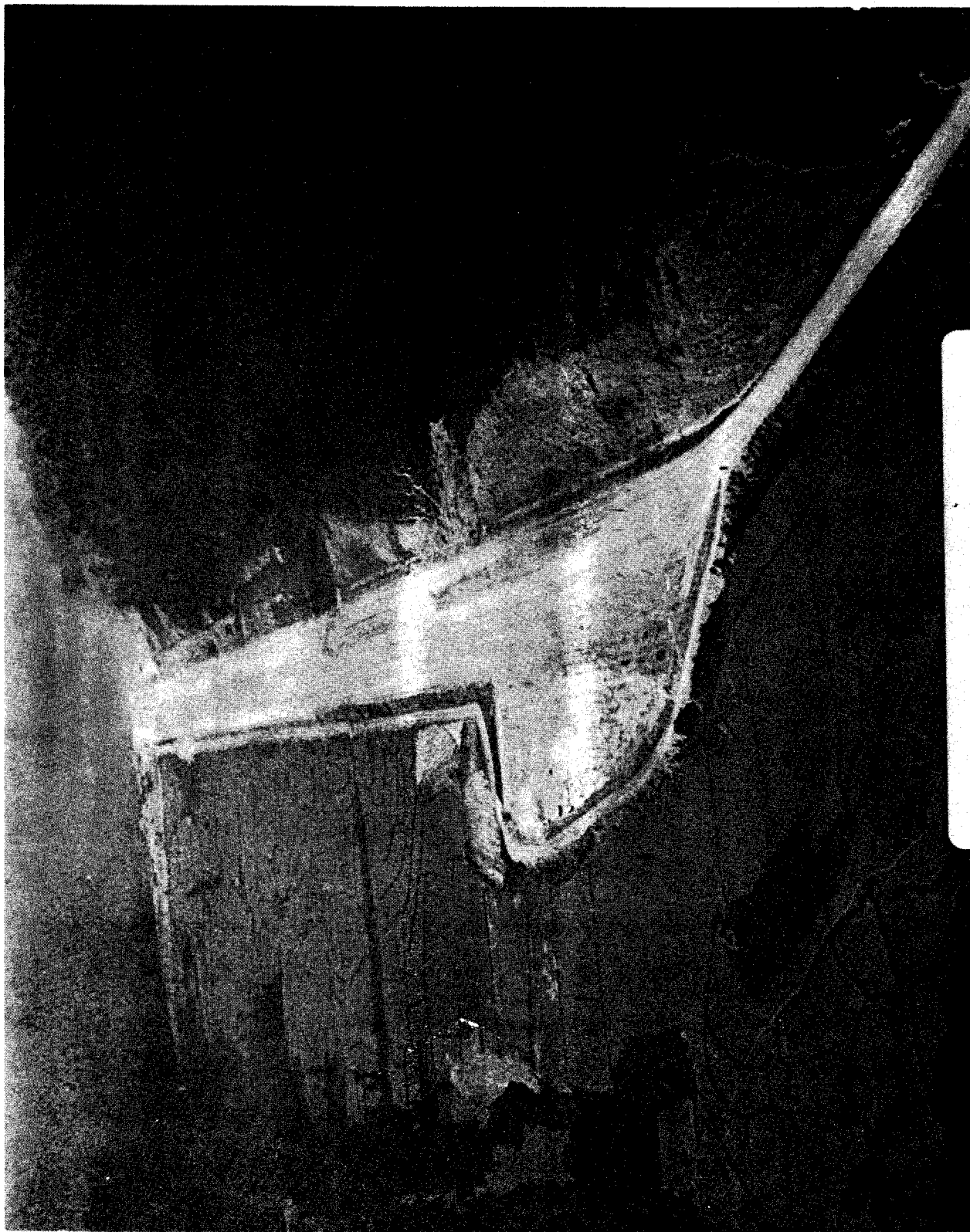
*"The empty CBU containers were sold here locally the other day. There were 210 of them and they brought \$2.00 apiece. The breakdown was:*

Each Pilot	-	\$20.00	=	\$160.00
Maint Pers	-	16.00	=	80.00
Weddings	-	20.00	=	40.00
Base CO*	-	70.00	=	70.00
Dep CO*	-	70.00	=	70.00
				<u>\$420.00</u>

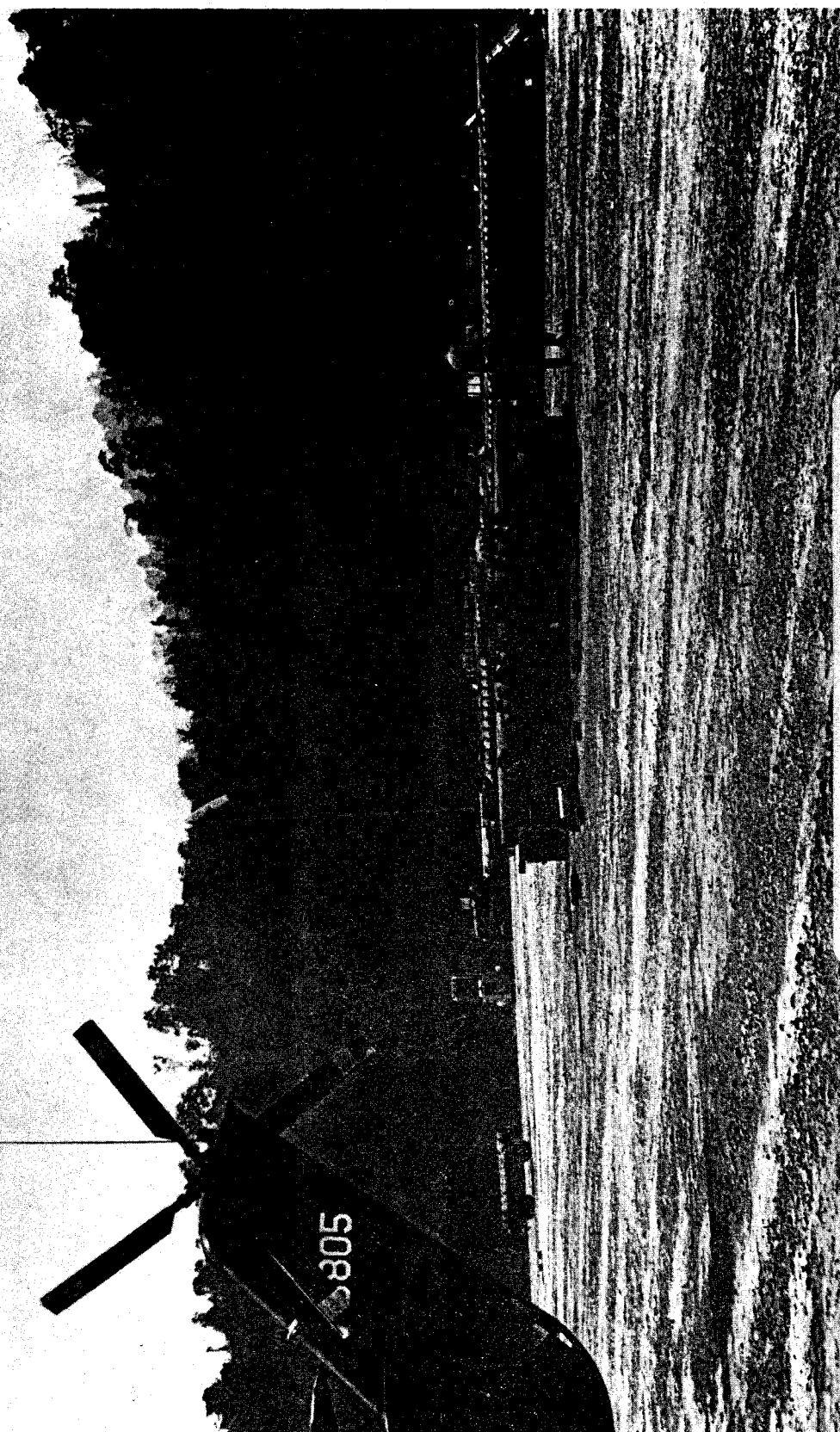
*"AOC was not involved in any way."*

By 1970, inflation had raised the prices of CBU containers at Luang Prabang to \$3.00, while at Vientiane they sold for \$4.00. Additionally, the shellcases from the AC-47s brought 6 Kip (about one cent U.S.) on the market,<sup>127/</sup> meaning that an RLAF Spooky crew stood to make upwards of \$200.00 a night from the sale of brass alone. It is no wonder that an AC-47 assignment was considered choice.

\*Money supposedly was to be used for base welfare.



Airstrip at Mong Khasi - April 1970.  
FIGURE 18



Bomb Dump at Muong Khasi - April 1970.  
FIGURE 19



Another method of supplementing the pay of the transport pilots was to sell seats on RLAF C-47s. The price of a ticket was usually about \$2.00, which was split with the crew. On 2 September 1969, a C-47 crashed, killing all 33 aboard. Only 19 bodies could be identified, and a month later AIRA said that "the total passenger list is not yet confirmed and may never be, since RLAF C-47 pilots have a habit of selling seats on their aircraft to civilians at planeside."<sup>128/</sup>

In an attempt to regularize this supplementary pay, in June 1970, the Chief of Operations said that General Sourith had sent out a letter to all RLAF commanders directing that "any money which is made must be shared with the people who worked on the airplanes too."<sup>129/</sup> At Luang Prabang, a month later, however, the AOC Commander said that he had "never seen a letter from General Sourith about standardizing the payoffs."<sup>130/</sup>

Generally, the effect that this rather complex system of corruption, thievery, and "payoffs" had on operations was significant. Savannakhet in late 1969 provides an example. There, the T-28 Commander was outranked by the maintenance officer; hence, according to the AOC Commander, the lieutenant had to "ask" that the aircraft be maintained and the bombs loaded. "In the past, this request has been in the form of a \$20 bill paid monthly out of the pilot's pocket."<sup>131/</sup>

For the RLAF Chief of Operations, a possible solution existed, one which also showed the absolute dependence of the RLAF on the United States:<sup>132/</sup>

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"For the U.S. to double the pay of the RLAF right now might help. For me, I could get along very well on twice what I am making now."

Command and Control--U.S. and RLAF

It was clear to all in 1970 that the greatest deficiency in the RLAF was command, control, and middle management. Ironically, however, with CAS intelligence and direction, plus Embassy and AIRA control of RLAF operations, these managerial and command functions were the very ones which U.S. personnel had been performing all along. Key positions such as AOC Commander, line chief, and supply officer, as well as the important jobs in intelligence and targeting, were all held by the Americans. Operational necessity had precluded the luxury of allowing RLAF personnel to make the decisions and mistakes from which they could learn to operate by themselves.

133/

As an assistant attache phrased it:

*"We, the Americans in AIRA, are seemingly the ones charged with keeping the show running, i.e., seeing that the MJ-1s are in working order, generators are on the line, etc. This apparently is a fact of life and, I guess, the only way we will ever see the mission halfway accomplished."*

It had not always been a unified effort, and weaknesses in the expanding U.S. support program had been evident to many. In 1968, for instance, the DEPCHIEF had noted that neither AIRA nor ARMA was actually advising but both were actually performing the jobs for the FAR and RLAF. In addition, there was a basic flaw in the U.S. support organization:

134/

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*"There is no one individual or office charged with the overall responsibility. RO/USAID is responsible for logistical advice, ARMA for operational advice to the Army, and AIRA for operational advice to the RLAF. In theory, actions of these offices are coordinated. Any difference of opinion, however, is difficult to resolve."*

The following year, the DEPCHIEF recommended unsuccessfully: 135/

*"Since the USA and USAF Attaches in Laos had been charged with advising the Royal Laotian Armed Forces and had been augmented in strength (Project 404) for that purpose, there was no further need for the separate RO/USAID organization, responsive to agencies other than the DOD, to perform the same function."*

An even stronger request was made to JCS by CINCPAC in 1970, proposing that there be created a CINCPACREPLAOS to "assist the U.S. mission in Laos by directing all JANAF and MASF Support Activities including those functions assumed from DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI, RO/USAID, ARMA/AIRA and Project 404." He would report directly to the Ambassador. 136/

One of the reasons for this continuing proposal by DEPCHIEF was the limited access to Laos for DEPCHIEF representatives, because of the clandestine nature of U.S. presence. In April 1970, for instance, the DEPCHIEF again reported that "the Terms of Reference under which the DEPCHIEF organization functions could not be fully implemented because of the restrictions imposed upon DEPCHIEF's activities." A specific example was control of U.S. personnel, most of whom were assigned to the DEPCHIEF: "The combination of strictly controlled limited access to

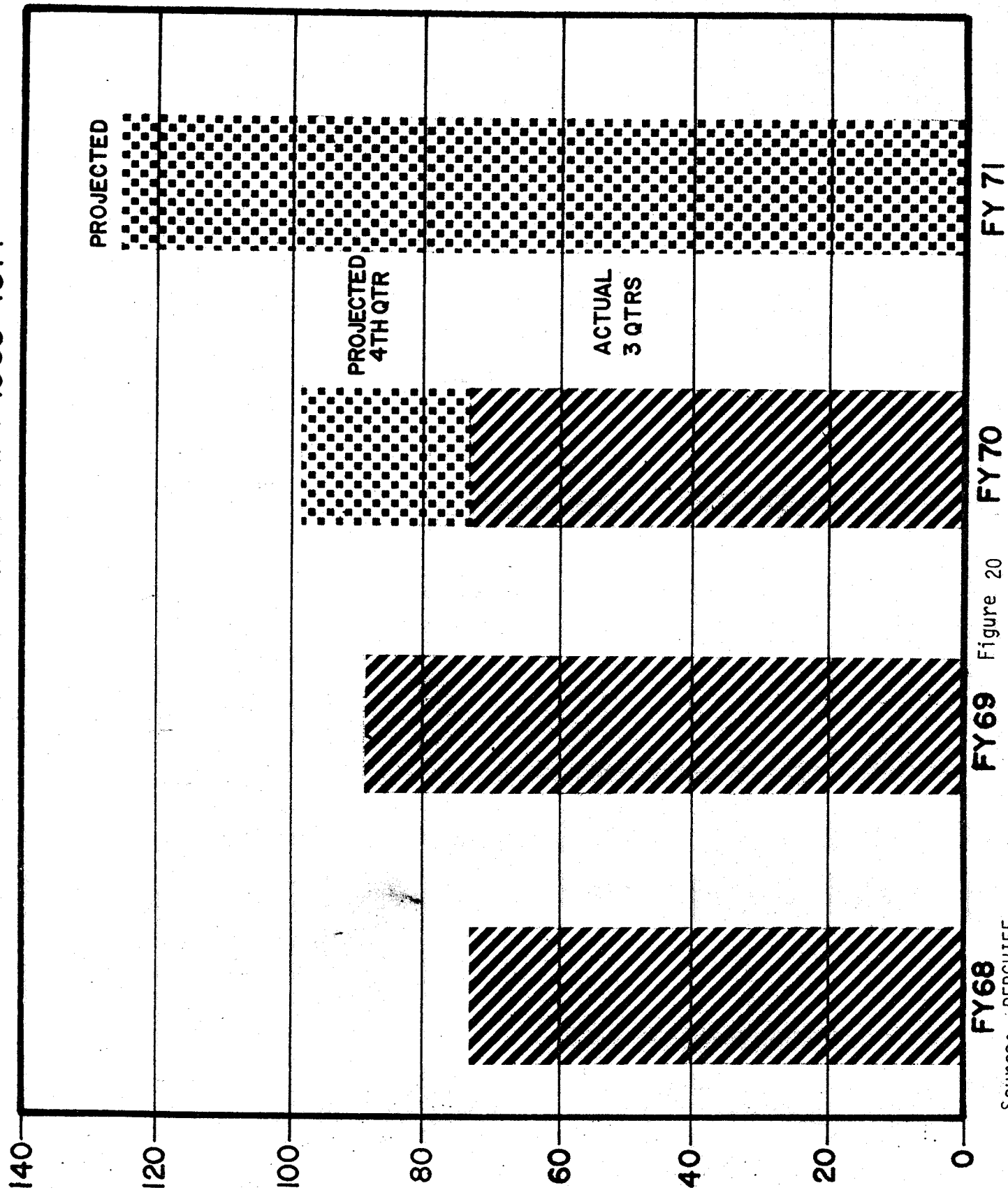
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Laos, plus loss of operational control of Project 404 personnel, precluded Deputy Chief's monitoring the utilization of such personnel."<sup>137/</sup> Interestingly, when DEPCHIEF personnel were allowed in-country, they were not always afforded a comprehensive examination of U.S. assets. For example, PEG reports for 1969 and 1970 mentioned the problems which affected the "two armies, the FAR and FAN," and cited visits made to "Sam Thong, the MR II Headquarters." In reality, Sam Thong was not the MR II Headquarters. This was at Long Tieng, the home of General Vang Pao and his guerrillas. At no time in the two annual reports was mention made of the third army in Laos, the [CAS-advised] SGUs, who traditionally had done most of the fighting.

"Our biggest problem all along has been command and control," said the air attache, "even during the early SEACORD meetings...We did not know where the command lines were then, and nothing has changed." For a while, he added, "We knew who was running the show, because all the Ambassador's messages were info to the White House."<sup>138/</sup> Citing specific defects, such as the use of airpower as artillery, overexpenditure and inefficient use of U.S. assets, and improper manning, two DEPCHIEF representatives summed up their views. The Chief of Staff said:<sup>139/</sup>

*"In all the years we've been helping them, we haven't taught these people a damn thing about how to manage their resources...Overall, the RLAF is an example of improper utilization of air assets. The Ambassador says that he really doesn't 'command,' that he 'approves.' Well, if approval isn't making a decision, I don't know what is."*

# FLYING HOURS ALL AIRCRAFT 1968-1971



Source: EXECUTIVE

FY69 Figure 20

FY70

FY71

# FORCE STRENGTHS - RLAF

PERSONNEL	PRE 1964	(May-Dec) 1964	1965	(Jan-Oct) 1966	(Oct-Dec) 1966	1967	1968	1969	1970	PROPOSED
OFFICER	137 (SEPT)	143 (DEC)	165 (OCT)	196 (MAY)	189	197	213	250	283	679
EM	987	1058	1156	1141	1176	1234	1346	1488-1408	1399	2213
TNG						144			300	
TOTAL	*721 (1961)	*1101	*1321	*1337		*1544	*1544	*1625	1915 (JUL)	3000 (2500)
PILOTS	1963 12 T-28	11AA B-25	27	43	33	30 (DEC)	41 (JAN)		39/50 (JUL)	171 + 10 IP
AT-6/T-28	5 AT-6 (1961)	20 T-28 (25 MAY)	31 (MAR)	33	34	55 (JUN)	86 (MAY) 47 (OCT)	57 (SEPT)	76 (MAR)	112
INCL UDORN	4 T-28	33 (SEPT)	42 (AUG)			44 (JUL)	58 (MAY)			
BASED A/C		40 (DEC)	35 (DEC)			47 (DEC)	52 (JUN) 60 (OCT)	59 (DEC)		
		19								
PILOTS		14		15 (SEPT)		19 (DEC)	26		27	78 (INCL AC-47)
C-47	6 (1959)	18 (APR)	22 (FEB)	17	17	17 (MAR)	17 (MAY)	19 (APR)		
	9 IL-2 (1962)	20 (DEC)	22 (DEC)			17 (DEC)	16 (JUN)	20 (SEPT)	25 (MAR)	
	ALSO IL-14						15 (OCT)	21 (DEC)		
PILOTS			3	10		13 (DEC)	9		15	74
U-17/O-1	HANDFUL (1954)	5 (DEC)	8 (FEB)	MANY OF THESE ARE DUAL C-47 CURRENT)		7 (MAR)	19 (MAY)	21 (SEP)	26 (MAR)	
U-6/U-4		4 (DEC)	6 (DEC)			15 (DEC)	26 (OCT)	19 (NOV)		
PILOTS		4 (DEC)	4			11 (LAOS BASED)	23	21	33	77
HELICOPTERS	21 (1962)	UE-33	8 (DEC)	7 (OCT)		4 (MAR)	12 (MAY)	12 (APR)	14 (MAR)	25
	4 (AUG 63)	INCL UDORN				7 (DEC)	11 (OCT)	10 (SEP)		
	14							11 (DEC)		
	18									
PILOTS								8	6 (JUL)	19
AC-47								5 (SEP)	7 (MAR)	12
									8 (JUL)	
TOTAL AIRCRAFT		68 (DEC)	71 (DEC)	63	64	86 (DEC)	112 (OCT)	115	148 (MAR)	
TOTAL PILOTS		33 (B-25)	56	70	59	73 (DEC)	105	116 (APR) 104 (MAY)	145	410
TOTAL NAVIGATORS						10		5	29	78

○ ACTIVE, NO CO-PILOT

△ INCLUDES USAIRA ACFT

■ B TEAM WILL REMAIN AT APPROX 20 AVAIL (PHASE OUT, 1970)

• ON PAPER

▲ INCLUDES RADIO OPERATORS

FIGURE 21

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The Chief of Air Force Operations agreed: <sup>140/</sup>

*"What we need is one manager, rather than the multiple managers we now have. The whole operation is a mass of unrelated efforts. ARMA-AIRA-CAS all work and are funded separately. No one knows what the other is doing."*

A discussion of this problem [with a CAS official\*] elicited the disclaimer that "We know who's running the show. That's just the way it has to be. If Seventh Air Force understood what was going on up here, they wouldn't keep sending all their airplanes against the Ho Chi Minh Trail." <sup>141/</sup>

Faced with the overwhelming power of the "grand seigneurs" of Vientiane, compelled by operational necessity to make USAF personnel do, rather than advise, and restricted by an extremely cumbersome command and control system, U.S. officials in Laos, both Air Force and quasi-civilian, had quite understandably had little success in helping the RLAF create a self-sufficient organization of its own, despite the many years of American assistance.

\*Despite official permission from CIA Headquarters in Washington (Msg, CINCPACAF to CHECO, Udorn, subj: RLAF Report 160228Z May 70), the author of this report was never able to interview Air America or CAS personnel officially, despite repeated requests. On one occasion, after having been granted permission to interview General Vang Pao by CAS, Vientiane, the author was refused access to General Vang Pao by CAS 20A.

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## EPILOGUE

Irrespective of the problems connected with U.S. support and RLAF organization, nothing can detract from the performance for so many years of so many dedicated men, both United States and RLAF. The combat pilots of the Royal Laotian Air Force, however, who flew first T-28s, then AC-47s from primitive fields, in extremely bad weather and at night with only unreliable ADF approach aids, deserved the greatest recognition. The saying at WATERPUMP that "We take these little guys right off the backs of water buffalo and make fighter pilots out of them in six months" was often literally quite true; yet an experienced AOC Commander told the author of this report that "I wouldn't hesitate to fly combat with any of them."

An incident reported in the 11 July Joint Operational Summary provides an example of both bravery and foolhardiness, and indicates why, if operations were to keep on as they had in the past, the RLAF pilots might well continue to "fly until they die:"

*"On 8 July, A-1s and T-28s failed repeatedly to hit a very small cave entrance at TG756257, known to be occupied by a number of enemy. Lt. Yang Xiong, senior Meo T-28 pilot, arrived on the scene and was directed to target by General Vang Pao, who told the pilot many airplanes had tried, but that nobody could hit the narrow cave opening. Yang Xiong made one dry pass and announced he could hit the target, and, if he missed, he wouldn't eat for the rest of the day (he has a weight problem, being that rare creature, the fat Meo). His first bomb was a bit short, but his second, dropped from a dangerously low altitude, exploded squarely in the cave*



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*entrance, enlarging the opening by several hundred percent and apparently killing all occupants.*

*"Three bodies were visible after the strike, and it is believed that many more enemy met their fate at the same instant. (Yang Xiong ate a hearty dinner that evening.)"*

In the words of another AOC Commander, "I don't know why we keep calling them 'the little guys'--hell, they're great big men."

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12. (S) Leuschner Interview.
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17. (S) Sonnenberg Interview.
18. (S) Ltr, George W. Nathan to James E. Butler, Deputy Chief, RO, 21 Jun 69, pg 1. (Hereafter cited: Nathan Letter.)
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- 25. (S) Msg, AMEMB, VTN, to Asst SecState, subj: T-28 Requirements Laos, #5443, 11 Aug 69.
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- 29. (S) Ltr, AOC Vientiane to AIRA, subj: AOC Weekly Commander's Report, 12 Sep 69.
- 30. (S) Oral Discussion, AIRA (Maj John C. Pratt, Representative), 19 Dec 69.
- 31. (S) Champeng Interview.
- 32. (S) Interview, Maj Charles Loucks, AAIRA, Vientiane, with Maj John C. Pratt, 6 May 70.
- 33. (S) Leuschner Interview.
- 34. (S) Ltr, AOC Savannakhet to AIRA, subj: Weekly Activity Report, 7-13 Sep 69.
- 35. (S) Concy Interview.
- 36. (S) Interview with RLAF Student Pilot, undated.
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43. (S) EOT Report, Wayne O. Landen, AOC Commander, Nov 68 - Apr 69.
44. (S) Ltr, Donald Moody, AOC Commander to AIRA VTN, subj: EOT Report, W. O. Landen, 26 Apr 69.
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46. (S) Landen EOT Report.
47. (S) Nathan Letter, pg 3.
48. (S) DEPCH Hist Rprt, 1 Oct 68 - 28 Feb 69.
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50. (S) V-12 Report, DEPCH, 25 Jul 69.
51. (S) Memo, Maj Charles Loucks to Col R. F. Tyrrell, AIRA, VTN, 30 Aug 69.
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- 63. (S) Loucks Interview, #2.
- 64. (S) Daily Briefing, 7AF/13AF, 27 Dec 69.
- 65. (S) Interview, Maj Charles Torrey, Alleycat ABCCC with Maj John C. Pratt, 28 Dec 69.
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- 75. (S) Sonnenberg Interview.
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14. (S) BRWG, 18 May 70.
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16. (S) JANAF Summary, 6 Jun 70.
17. (S) BRWG, 26 May 70.
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19. (S) Khouang Interview.
20. (S) JANAF Summary, 20 Jun 70.
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26. (S) Interview, Maj Ed Bender, AOC, Pakse, with Maj John C. Pratt, 13 Jun 70.
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28. (S) JANAF Summaries, 4 Jul 70; 11 Jul 70.
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45. (S) Keeler Interview.
46. (S) JANAF Summary, 4 Jul 70.
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48. (S) Sonnenberg Interview.
49. (S) Loucks Interview #2.
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56. (S) Neal-Jenkins Interview.
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63. (S) Sonnenberg Interview.
64. (S) Neal-Jenkins Interview.
65. (S) Vogel Interview.

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68. (S) Munsey-Reich Interview.
69. (S) Loucks Interview.
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76. (S) Concy Interview.
77. (S) Khouang Interview.
78. (S) Leuschner Interview.
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81. (S) Leuschner Interview.
82. (S) Concy Interview.
83. (S) Interview, Paul Certo, RO, VTN, with Maj John C. Pratt, 12 Jun 70.
84. (S) Munsey-Reich Interview.
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86. (S) Bender Interview.
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88. (S) DOD, IR, 6 856 0080 70, 21 Mar 70, pg 7.
89. (S) DEPCHIEF Munitions Briefing, pg 5.
90. (S) Tribble Interview.

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92. (S) Leuschner Interview.
93. (S) Certo and Neal-Jenkins Interviews.
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96. (S) Interview, Mr. Campos with Maj John C. Pratt,  
3 Jul 70.
97. (S) Concy Interview;  
(S) Champeng Interview.
98. (S) Bauman Interview.
99. (S) Champeng Interview.
100. (S) Munsey - Reich Interview.
101. (S) Neal - Jenkins Interview.
102. (S) Vogel Interview.
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107. (S) DOD, IR, 1 856 0011 69, 4 Feb 69, pg 2.
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- 115. (S) Concy Interview.
- 116. (S) Tyrrell Interview.
- 117. (S) Tribble Interview.
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- 119. (S) Ltr, AOC, Vientiane to AIRA, VTN, subj: AOC Weekly Commander's Report, 9 Nov 68.
- 120. (S) Ltr, AOC, Vientiane to AIRA Vientiane, subj: AOC Weekly Commander's Report, 8 Aug 69.
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- 122. (S) Chantasone Interview.
- 123. (S) Honk Interview.
- 124. (S) DOD, IR, 1 856 0129 68, 18 Nov 68, pg 2.
- 125. (S) Tyrrell Interview.
- 126. (S) Ltr, AOC, L-54 to AIRA, Vientiane, subj: Weekly Commander's Report, 12-18 Sep 68.
- 127. (S) Munsey - Reich Interview.
- 128. (S) DOD, IR, 6 856 0160 69, 4 Oct 70.
- 129. (S) Concy Interview.
- 130. (S) Munsey - Reich Interview.
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- 132. (S) Concy Interview.
- 133. (S) Memo, Maj Dale Fulton to Mr. Hollowell, subj: Support for AOCs, 27 Mar 68.
- 134. (S) DEPCH Hist Summary, May 68, para 2 B89, pg 234.
- 135. (S) PEG Report 1969, 24 Apr 69, pg 8.
- 136. (S) Msg, CINCPAC to JCS, 031435W Feb 70.
- 137. (S) PEG Rprt, 28 Apr 70, pg 15.
- 138. (S) Tyrrell Interview.

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- 139. (S) Interview, Col Thomas J. Heller with Maj John C. Pratt, 24 Jun 70.
- 140. (S) Bauman Interview.
- 141. (S) Oral Discussion, [CAS Official, 4802 JLD] Udorn, with Maj John C. Pratt, 25 Jul 70.

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APPENDIX I

RLAF PAY SCALE

The pay scale for the RLAF has many variable factors and is extremely complicated in nature. The RLAF maintains many thick volumes to regulate pay, all of which were published in 1964. The cost of living in Laos in the last five years has degraded the RLAF wage point where it is a constant source of complaint. A condensation of the monthly pay rates is as follows:

	<u>RANK</u>	<u>KIP</u>	<u>EQUIV. U.S.</u>
	A/B	2,500	\$ 5.00
(up to)	S/Sgt (less than 5 yrs)	3,400	6.80
	S/Sgt (more than 5 yrs)	3,581	7.16
	S/Sgt (more than 9 yrs)	4,058	8.11
	S/Sgt (more than 12 yrs)	4,417	8.83
	S/Sgt (more than 20 yrs)	5,252	10.50
	W/O (less than 5 yrs)	4,536	9.07
	W/O (more than 20 yrs)	7,162	14.32
	2/Lt	6,565	13.13
	1/Lt (less than 5 yrs)	7,282	14.56
	1/Lt (over 5 yrs)	8,117	16.25
	1/Lt (over 7 yrs)	8,953	17.90
	Capt (less than 4 yrs)	9,072	18.14
	Capt (over 9 yrs)	10,027	20.05
	Capt (over 12 yrs)	10,744	21.49
	Maj (less than 3 in grade)	10,744	21.49
	Maj (more than 3 + 15 yrs service)	11,699	23.39
	Maj (more than 6)	12,893	25.78
	Lt Col (less than 3 in grade)	13,370	26.74
	Lt Col (more than 3 yrs in grade)	15,041	30.08
	Col (less than 3 in grade)	16,235	32.47
	Col (more than 3 in grade)	17,907	35.81
	Col (more than 6 in grade)	19,100	38.20
	B/Gen (less than 2 in grade)	20,055	40.11
	B/Gen (over 2 in grade)	21,727	43.45
	M/Gen (less than 3 in grade)	23,398	46.79
	M/Gen (over 3 in grade)	25,069	50.13

Six percent of each monthly base pay is deducted for the retirement fund.

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In addition, pilots receive flying pay as follows:

T-28 pilots - 15,000 KIP/Month	\$30.00
All others - 13,000 KIP/Month	\$26.00

Family allowances are as follows:

Enlisted Men:

Married w/no children	(\$0.60)
w/1 thru 6 children 500 KIP per child	(\$1.00)
w/1 thru 6 children (and over 20 yrs service 1,000 KIP per child	(\$2.00)

Officers and W/Os:

Married w/no children	420 KIP (\$0.84)
Married w/1 child	1,000 KIP (\$2.00)
Married w/1 child (over 5 yrs service)	1,600 KIP (\$3.20)
Married w/2 children (over 5 yrs service)	2,400 KIP (\$4.80)
Married w/3 thru 12 children	1,500 KIP (\$3.00 ea.) Per child

GLOSSARY

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AAIRA	American Air Attache
ABCCC	Airborne Battlefield Command and Control Center
ABS	Air Battle Staff
ADF	Automatic Defense Finder
AGE	Aerospace Ground Equipment
AIRA	Air Attache
AMEMB	American Embassy
AOC	Air Operations Center; Air Officer Commanding
APC	Armored Personnel Carrier
APU	Asian Parliamentarians Union
ARMA	Army Attache
CAS	Close Air Support; Controlled American Source
CBU	Cluster Bomb Unit
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CINCPAC	Commander-in-Chief, Pacific Command
CINCPACREPLAOS	Commander-in-Chief, Pacific Command Representative, Laos
COC	Combat Operations Center
CSAF	Chief of Staff, United States Air Force
DABS	Director of the Air Battle Staff
DASC	Direct Air Support Center
DEPCHIEF	Deputy Chief
DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI	Deputy Chief, Joint U.S. Military Advisory Group, Thailand
DOD	Department of Defense
EOT	End of Tour
FAC	Forward Air Controller
FAG	Forward Air Guide
FAN	Forces Armee Neutre
FAR	Forces Armee Royale
FOV	Field Office Vietnam
GM	Group Mobile
IP	Instructor Pilot
IR	Intelligence Report
JANAF	Joint Army-Navy-Air Force
JOC	Joint Operations Center
JOS	Joint Operational Summary
JUSMAG	Joint U.S. Military Assistance Group
JUSMAGTHAI	Joint U.S. Military Assistance Group, Thailand
KBA	Killed by Air
LAO	Laotian
LOC	Line of Communications
LP	Luang Prabang

MACV	Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
MAG	Military Assistance Group
MAAG	Military Assistance Advisory Group
MAP	Military Assistance Program
MASF	Military Assistance Service Funded
mm	millimeter
MR	Military Region
MTT	Mobile Training Team
NCO	Noncommissioned Officer
NVA	North Vietnamese Army
NVN/PL	North Vietnam(ese)/Pathet Lao
PCS	Permanent Change of Station
PDJ	Plaine des Jarres
Pers	Personnel
PEO	Program Evaluation Office
PL/NVN	Pathet Lao/North Vietnam(ese)
RLAF	Royal Laotian Air Force
RLG	Royal Laotian Government
RO	Requirements Office
RTAFB	Royal Thailand Air Force Base
SAF	Search and Rescue
SecDef	Secretary of Defense
SecState	Secretary of State
SGU	Special Guerrilla Unit
SOF	Special Operations Force
SOW	Special Operations Wing
STOL	Short Takeoff and Landing
SVN	South Vietnam
TAC	Tactical Air Command; Tactical
TACAN	Tactical Air Navigation
TACS	Tactical Air Control System
TDY	Temporary Duty
TOR	Terms of Reference
UE	Unit Equipment
UMD	Unit Manning Document
USA	United States Army
VNAF	Vietnam Air Force
VP	Vang Pao

ASIA  
3308A  
251  
70A  
30A  
101A  
010A  
101  
25A  
10A